The Unicorn Tapestries

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The Unicorn Tapestries

Based on a study of the Unicorn Tapestries
by Margaret B. Freeman, Curator Emeritus of The Cloisters.
Adaptation by Linda Sipress, staff writer.
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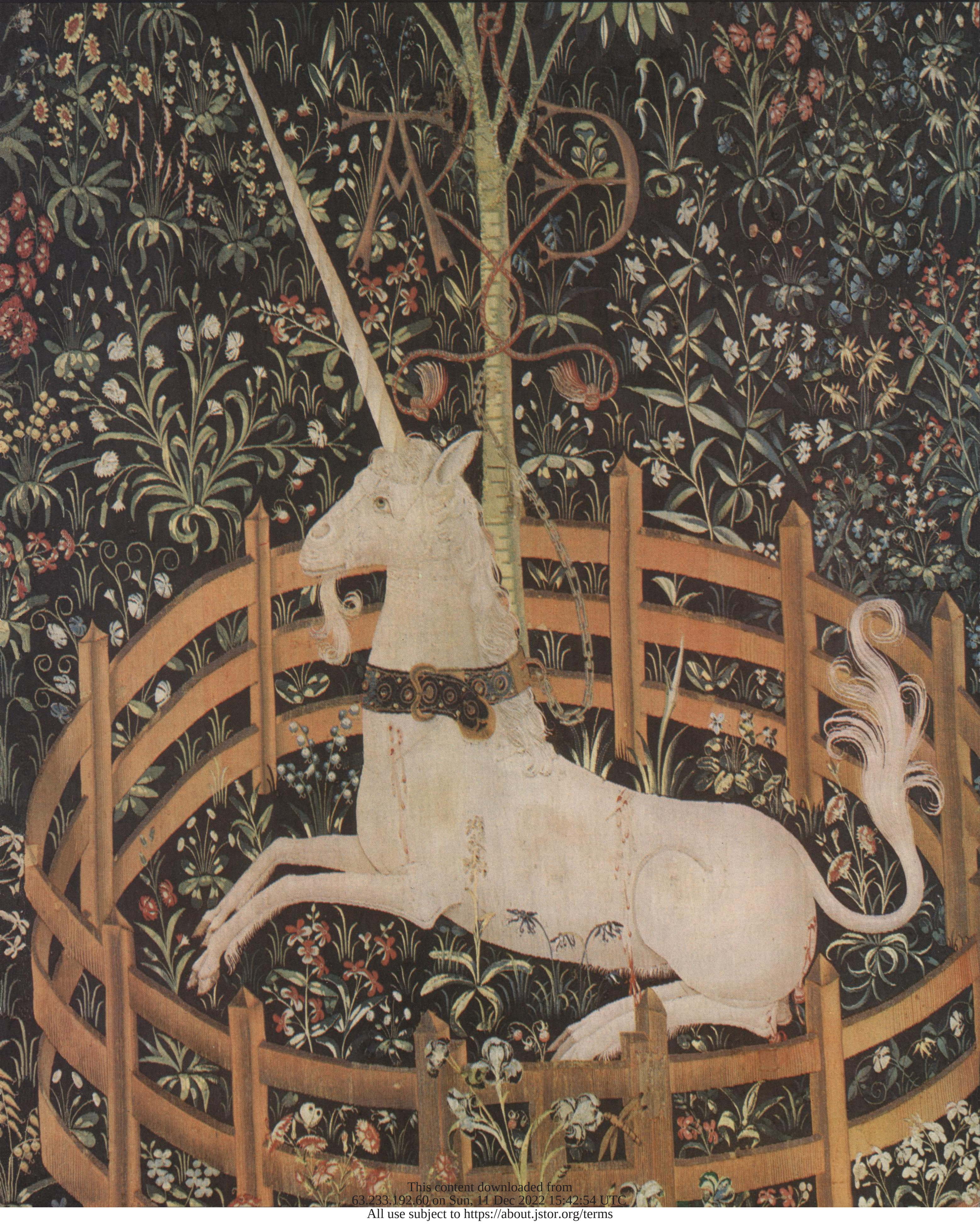
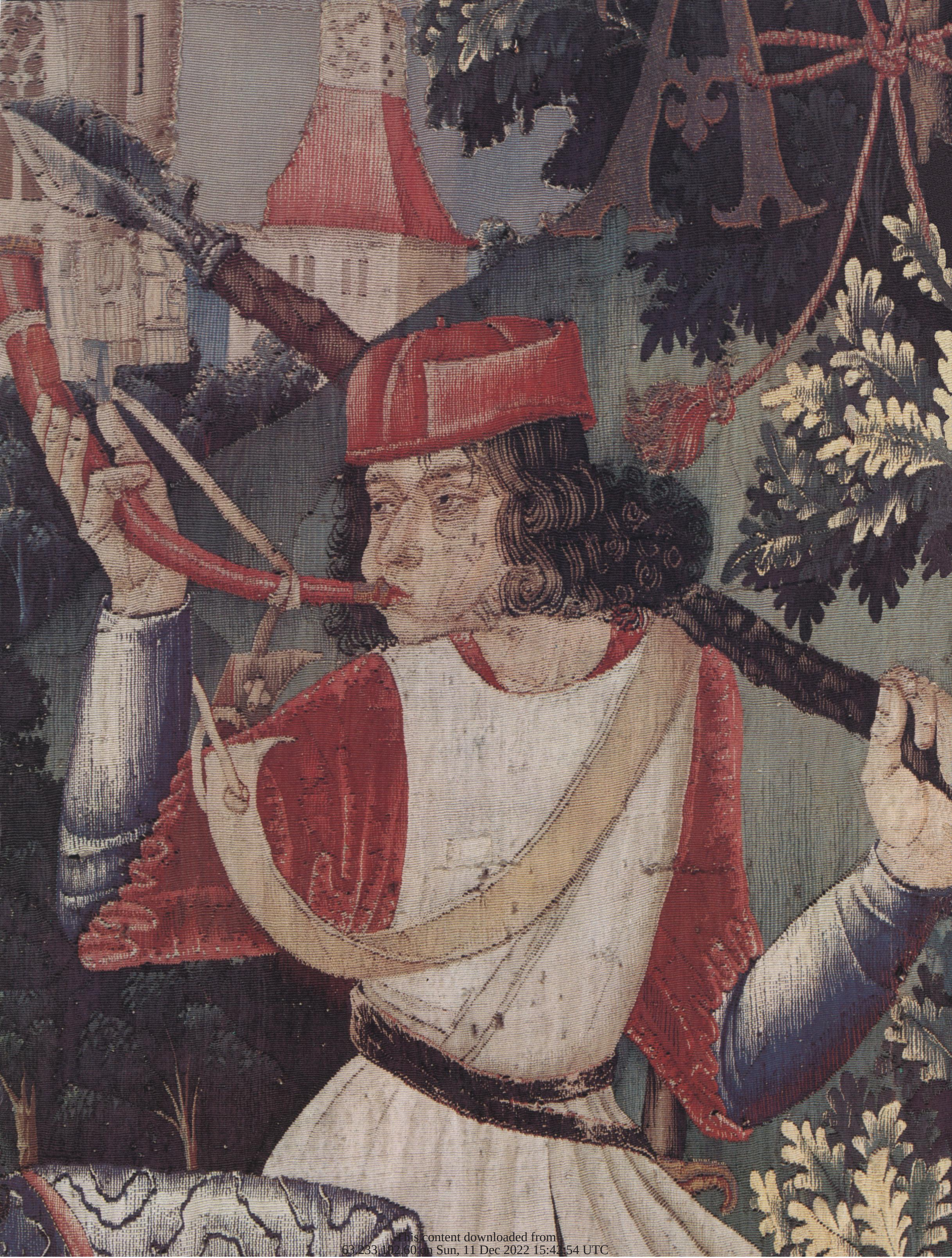
I stood in the Maytime meadows
By roses circled round
Where many a fragile blossom
Was bright upon the ground;
And as though the roses called them
And their wild hearts understood,
The little birds were singing
In the shadows of the wood.
The nightingale among them
Sang sweet and loud and long,
Until a greater voice than hers
Rang out above her song.
For suddenly between the crags,
Along a narrow vale
The echoes of a hunting horn
Came clear along the gale.
The hunter stood beside me
Who blew that mighty horn,
I saw that he was hunting
The noble unicorn.
The unicorn is noble;
He keeps him safe and high
Upon a narrow path and steep
Climbing to the sky;
And there no man can take him;
He scorns the hunter's dart
And only a virgin's magic power
Shall tame his haughty heart.

From a medieval German folksong

The Unicorn Tapestries





The First Tapestry:
The Start of the Hunt

Front cover: Of the seven Unicorn Tapestries belonging to The Cloisters it is the last, The Unicorn in Captivity, that is the great public favorite and perhaps one of the most beloved tapestries in the world.

Inside front cover: This young man in the third tapestry sounds a piercing blast upon his bright red horn to herald the hunt of the unicorn, an event filled with great drama that is the theme of the Cloisters tapestries.

Inside back cover: Illustrated here is a section of the castle from the background of the sixth tapestry.

Back cover: Three courtly ladies from the sixth tapestry are part of the crowd that has assembled to witness the arrival of the dead unicorn at the castle of their lord and lady.

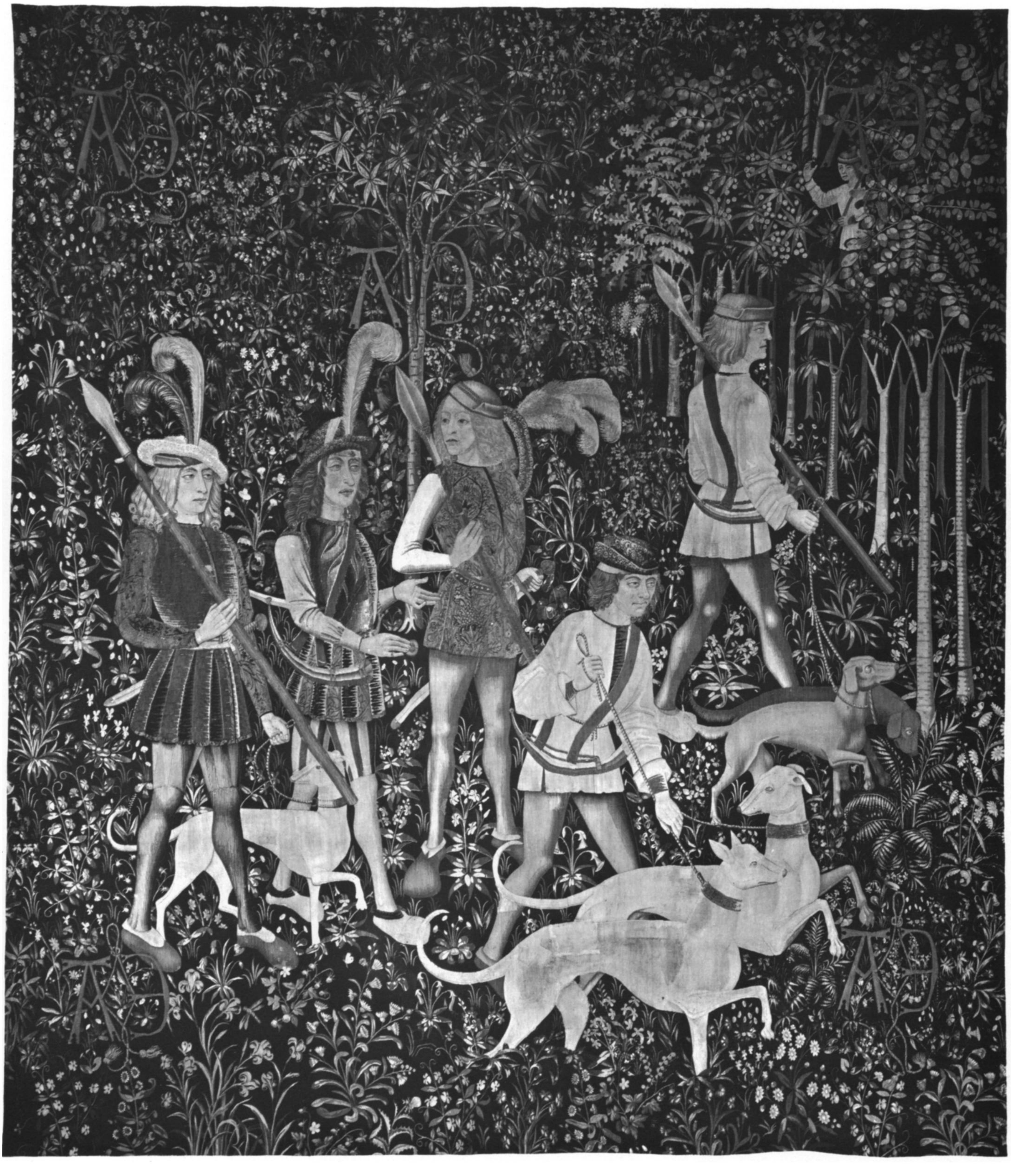
Each of the Unicorn Tapestries is 12 feet 1 inch high except for the fragmentary fifth hanging: its height is approximately 5 feet 9 inches. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 37.80.1-6, and The Cloisters Collection, 38.51.1,2.
Color photographs: Malcolm Varon

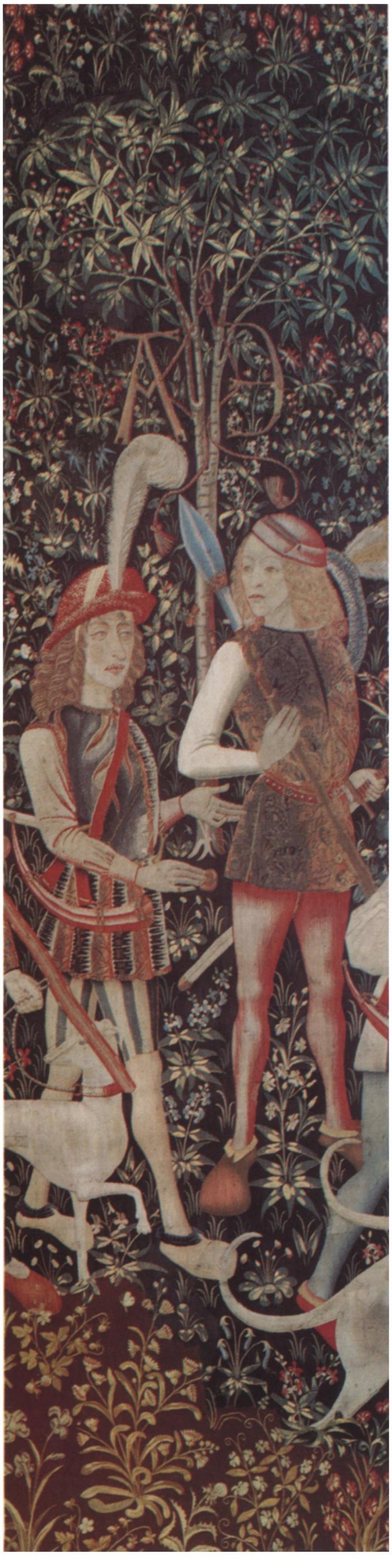
Within a flowering glade at the edge of a forest, one of the greatest adventures ever portrayed in the history of art is about to begin. It is a medieval hunt, but no ordinary one: the hunters in the first of seven splendid tapestries are setting forth to capture the legendary unicorn. Of all the fabulous creatures recorded in ancient bestiaries, from the two-headed amphisboena to the black yale with flexible horns, the one most familiar to the modern world is the unicorn, which has never ceased to fascinate mankind. The Cloisters tapestries have undoubtedly contributed to keeping the unicorn image as alive today as it was when the set was woven about 1500. Then everyone believed in the existence of this marvelous creature. The mastermind who conceived the tapestries, in a stroke of genius, decided to integrate the unicorn story with the procedures of the medieval stag hunt. This concept was subsequently executed with monumentality, incredible detail, technical brilliance, and subtle coloring in some of the finest tapestries produced during the Middle Ages. The pictorial effect of these hangings is enhanced by their symbolic content: personalities, flora, fauna, and particularly the unicorn himself have both religious and secular meaning.

The first tapestry shows three noblemen about to begin their search for the unicorn. Instead of protective leather leggings and other practical accouterment, they wear sumptuous outfits and feathered hats. Unsuitably dressy as they may be for pursuing game, these costumes add immensely to the richness and color of the tapestry. The chief participant in the chase is the young *seigneur* or lord (second from left). Accompanying him and his two dignified companions are the hound keepers and a page placed in the upper right corner, who is probably signaling that the unicorn has been sighted. Strapped over the lord's shoulder is a hunting horn; each of the hound keepers has one too. They hold their charges on leashes, awaiting the start of the chase.

The Unicorn Tapestries reveal an abundance of trees, flowers, and shrubbery: in the entire series there are more than one hundred species, about eighty-five per cent identifiable. The first tapestry and the last are particularly rich in flora; both strikingly different in design from the rest, they have what is called a *millefleurs* background – scores of plants in a highly stylized "fantasy" setting reminiscent of the flowery meadows that so delighted people of the Middle Ages. The other tapestries show plants growing in their natural habitats: by a stream, in an orchard, a field, or along a garden fence. It is interesting to note that the human figures in the first tapestry are depicted with a certain stiffness that differentiates them from the more naturalistic characters in the other tapestries.

In spite of their attention to botanical accuracy, the designers and weavers ignored the seasons by juxtaposing plants in flower that ordinarily bloom at different times of the year. For example, a cherry tree laden with midsummer fruit appears here with springtime daffodils. Thus each plant is revealed in its prime, producing an enchanting ensemble of the best that nature has to offer.

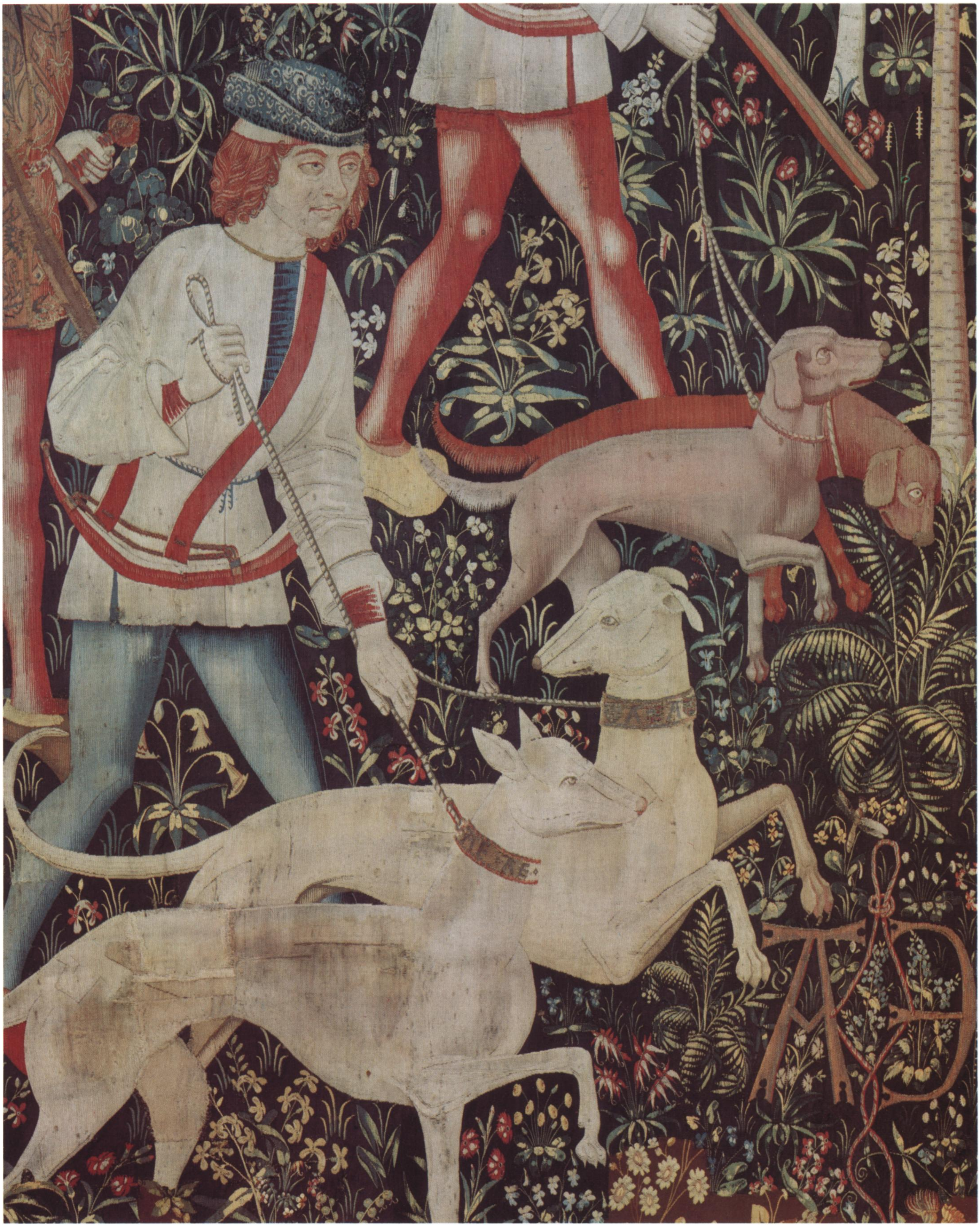


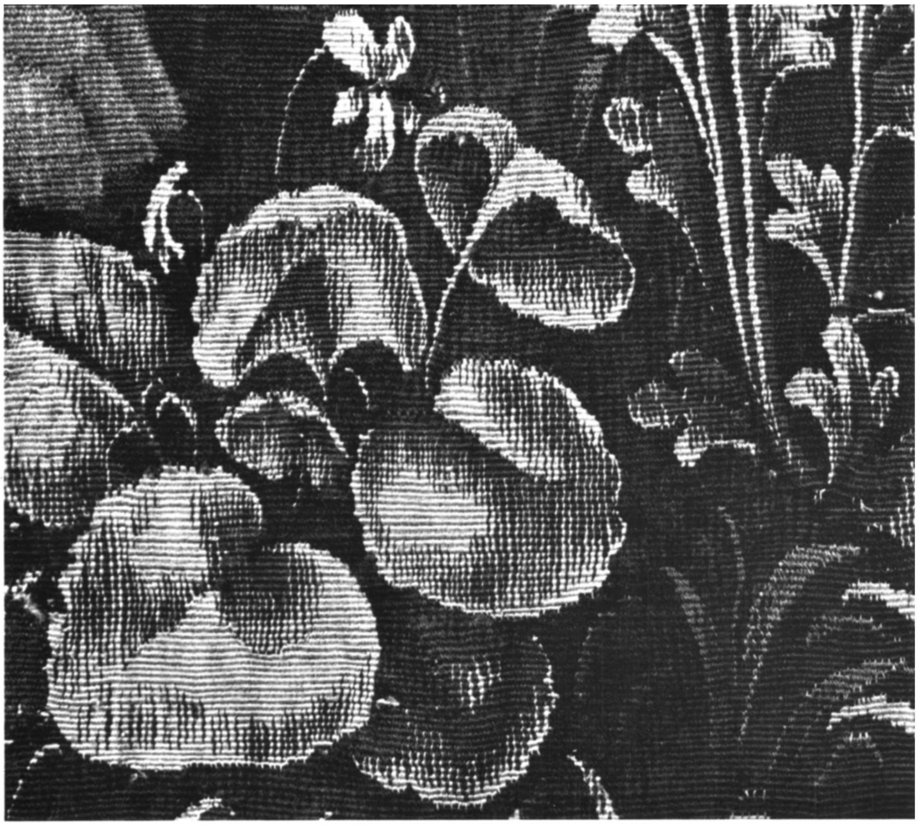


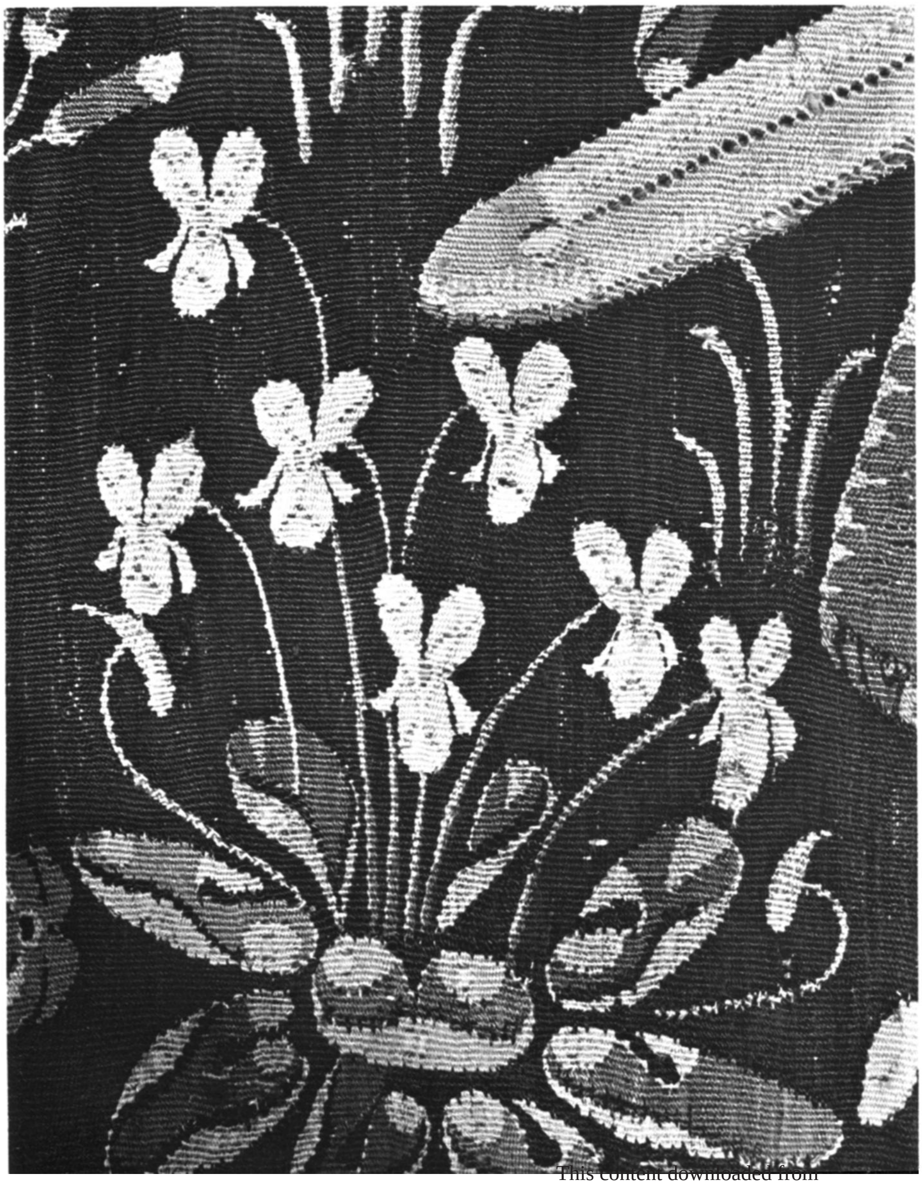
Left: In The Start of the Hunt the cherry tree is prominently displayed near the *seigneur* and his fellow huntsmen. The cherry is often considered to be one of the trees in Paradise and also, because of the abundance of its fruit, a symbol of eternal life. Cherry trees are sometimes associated with the Virgin Mary: a popular medieval legend recounts how in the cold of winter a cherry tree miraculously blossomed and bore fruit when Mary and Joseph passed by it on their way to Bethlehem before the birth of Christ. On the other hand, the cherry has secular, even erotic, significance, since in much medieval art the tree adorns scenes of love and revelry. Here it is likely that the tree stands for both celestial rewards and earthly delights.

The *seigneur* – from his striped breeches to his jaunty hat – is surely a picture of medieval fashion at its most up-to-date, as is his elegant companion, who has a spear in one hand and a sword at his side.

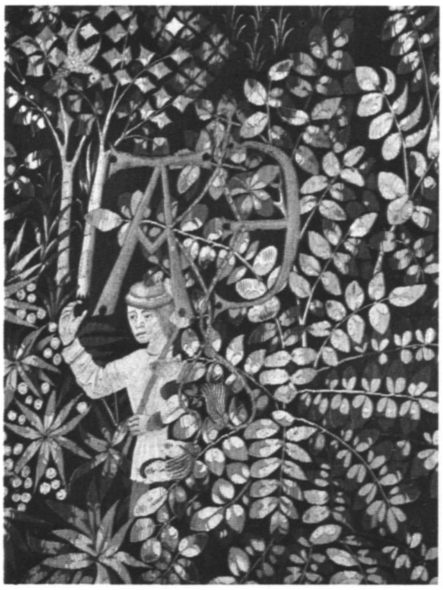
Right: Dogs are shown in nearly all the Cloisters tapestries. They were not only essential to the hunt, but also symbolized fidelity because of their devotion to their masters. According to fourteenth-century writer and hunting expert Gaston III, Count of Foix, two kinds of hounds were used: greyhounds, always ready to run "as swift as a fowl in flight," and running hounds that, says Gaston, "hunt all the day questing and making great melody in their language and saying great villainy and scolding the beasts that they chase." Both kinds of dog are present in the first tapestry: in the foreground is a pair of greyhounds whose keen sight made them indispensable in the hunt; above them are two running hounds, one sniffing the air, the other the ground. (The brownish area at the bottom is restored.)

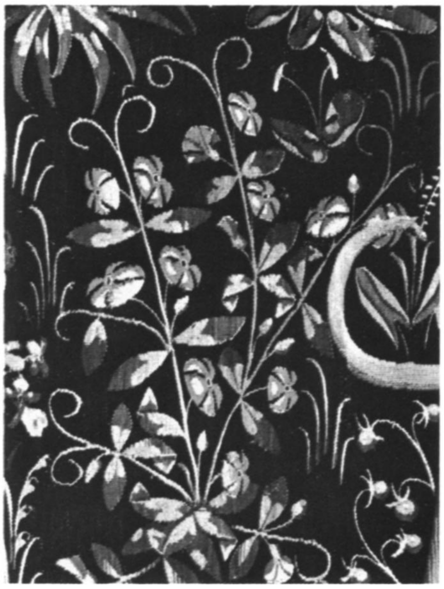






Especially beautiful in The Start of the Hunt are fragrant sweet violets (lower left), among the most cherished flowers of medieval times. Early writers tell how Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden where violets and roses and lilies grew; one poet describes the virgin martyrs wandering through fresh fields of Paradise, "Gathering roses red for the Passion, lilies and violets for love." The violet was frequently associated with the Virgin Mary and with humility, one of her most admired virtues. This flower appears in different hues in all the Unicorn Tapestries except the fifth. Here the simple, schematic, slightly rigid blossoms from the first tapestry are compared with violets from the sixth (above), which have a greater naturalness and three-dimensionality characteristic of that tapestry as a whole.





The shady grove within which the "signaler" stands includes a walnut tree, a linden, an aspen, and probably a blue plum. Decorative groves were extremely popular on fifteenth-century estates, but most of the trees here may have been selected for their special symbolism in addition to the aesthetic effect produced by the variety and patterning of their leaves. Take, for instance, the walnut: its nut has been considered a symbol of Christ, the outer sheath representing human flesh, the wood the cross on which he suffered, and the inner core his hidden divinity. Also, like all nuts, the walnut containing its ripe kernel was a sign of fruitfulness.

The mysterious insignia AE (the E reversed) tied with twisted rope occurs five times in this tapestry and repeatedly in all the others. Its meaning will be mentioned later in a discussion of the tapestries' ownership.

Shown above is the periwinkle, "joy of the ground," not only effective protection against "snakes and wild beasts and poisons and spite," but able to "cure any discord between man and wife." Carried on one's person, according to the herbals, it promotes prosperity, causes immunity from the devil's influence, and ensures freedom from terror.

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The Second Tapestry: The Unicorn at the Fountain

Here for the first time in the Cloisters tapestries the fabulous unicorn is the focus of all attention. He is extremely handsome – from the tip of his spiraled horn to his curly beard and exquisitely plumed tail. The huntsmen surround their quarry in a flowery clearing near a castle. In the center a fountain overflows into a quiet stream. The entire company watches in awe as the milky-white creature kneels to dip his horn into the rivulet.

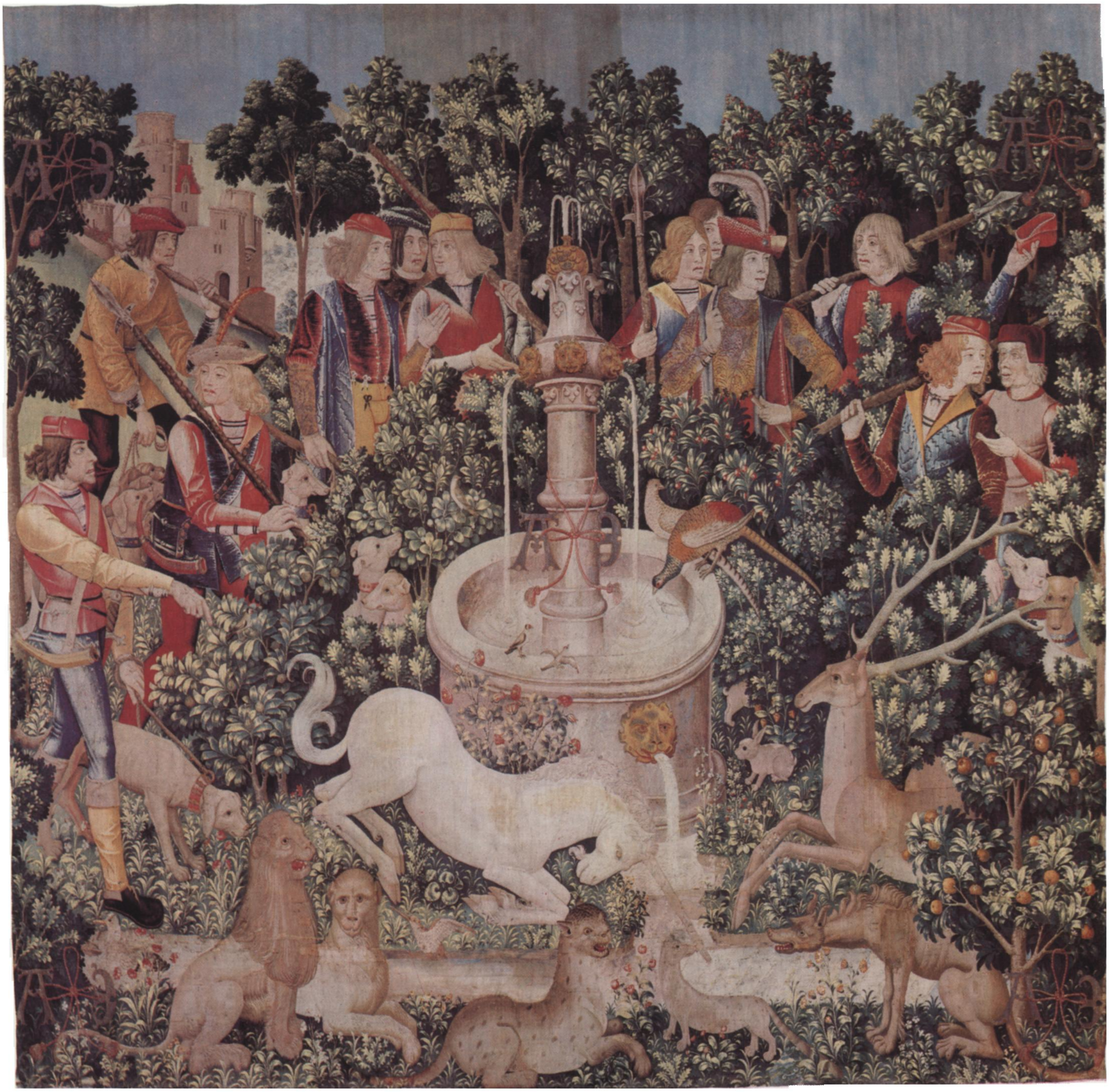
According to medieval tradition, a unicorn's horn possesses the magic power to remove serpent's venom from water, enabling birds and beasts of the forest, such as the ones waiting patiently in this tapestry, to quench their thirst safely. Coming to the rescue, the wondrous beast renders the serpent's curse ineffective. The act has a clearly religious connotation: the serpent is the devil who brought the poison of sin into the world, and the unicorn is Christ who redeemed mankind.

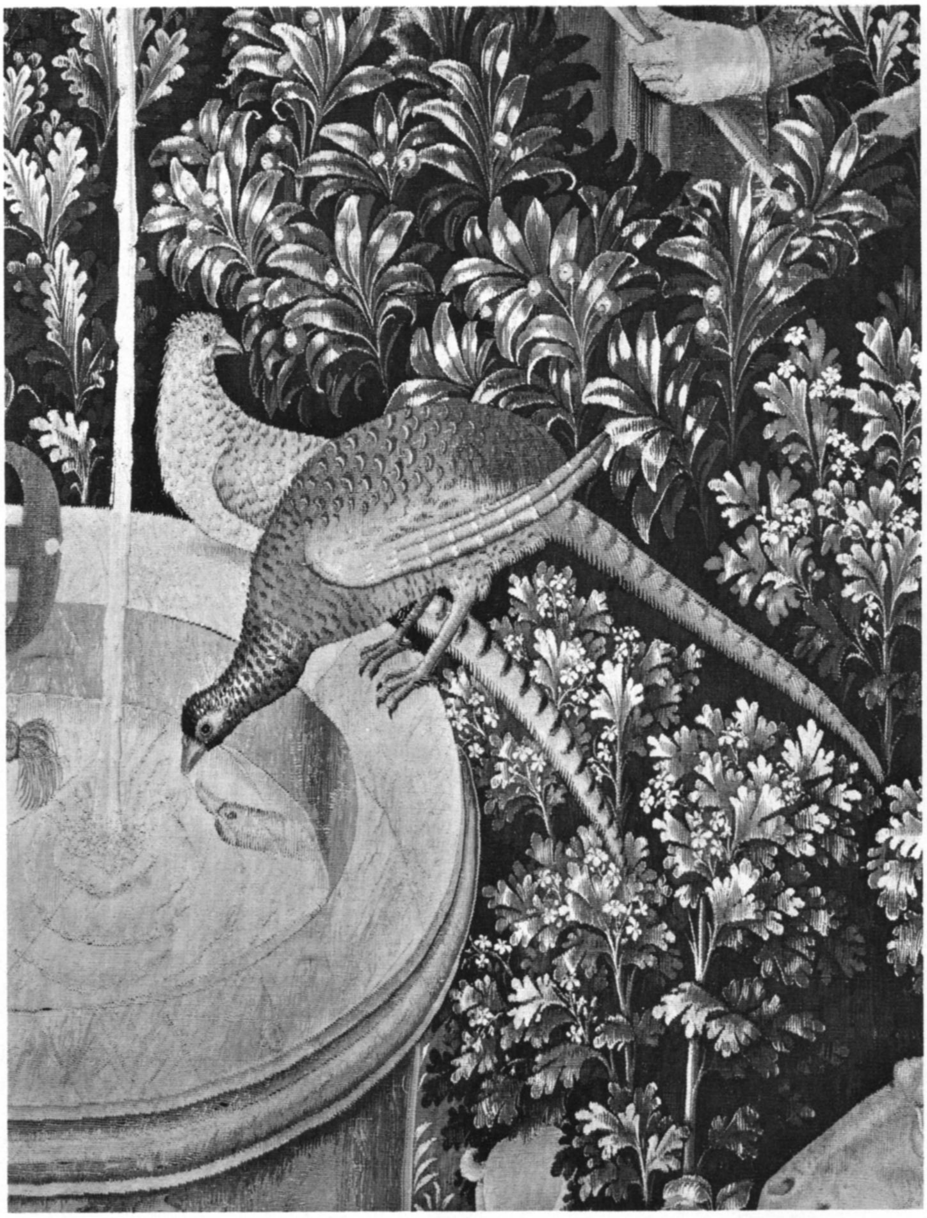
In the second tapestry the unicorn is indeed functioning as Christ the Redeemer, a probable explanation for the mood of serenity that dominates this poignant scene. The *seigneur*, ostrich plume in his hat and hand upraised, seems to order the group to pause and witness a noble, holy gesture. This halt is imperative for another reason: the rules of the hunt require the party to hold back until the quarry starts to run, for a harrowing chase is the hunter's paramount challenge. The overall tranquility is echoed in the tapestry's composition. The upright shaft of the fountain and the horizontal design of the stream form strong, stable lines. The curves of the oval fountain basin, repeated in the semicircular band of hunters above, provide lines of repose.

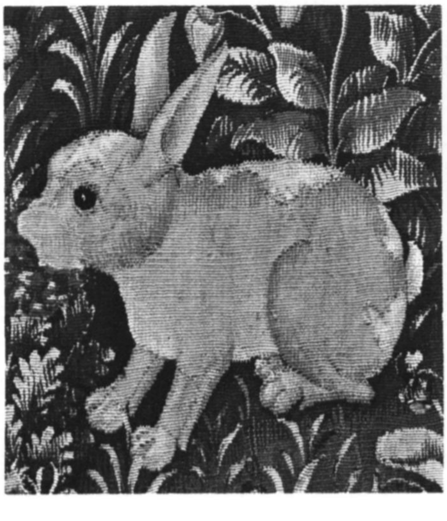
Several more participants have now joined the *seigneur*. The most important addition is the lymerer standing at the left, pointing authoritatively at the unicorn. This fellow set out well ahead of the rest: his job is to track down with his lymer, or scenting dog, clues such as footprints and droppings that lead to the game. He has a stubble of beard on his chin, perhaps indicating that he arose at daybreak and departed hastily without stopping to shave. The proud lymerer has accomplished his task and brought his companions to the unicorn's lair. Looking rather contemptuously at him is a young blond man. Right above them a hard-working, intense huntsman holds four dogs in leash. Near the *seigneur* are grooms, pages, and assistants, such as the stringy-haired, doltish yokel beside him who is content to carry his master's spear. Two pairs of greyhounds and a single one have been unleashed and are waiting attentively. The chase will soon begin.

A writer of the early Christian era says that the unicorn is so ferocious that no hunter can possibly capture him. Only by leading a virgin maiden to him can he be taken. Charmed by her, the unicorn springs into her lap and embraces her. Tamed and distracted, he is then trapped, killed by the huntsmen, and brought to the palace of the king. It is important to note that the unicorn hunt and capture in the tapestries have enormous symbolic significance. On one level the symbolism is religious: the hunt and capture by a virgin are themes that can be interpreted as the whole divine plan for man's Redemption – Christ's incarnation through his birth to the Virgin Mary, the pursuit of him by his enemies, his death on the cross, and finally his resurrection, which coincides with the reappearance of the live unicorn in the last tapestry. On the other hand the symbolism is secular: many people believe that the Unicorn Tapestries were made to celebrate a wedding, their story representing an allegory of courtship and marriage. After the fourteenth century the unicorn sought by hunters and then beguiled by the virgin maid personified the valiant medieval lover undergoing great danger and suffering to gain the acceptance of his beloved.

The mixing of religious and secular symbolism in a single work was not unusual during the late Middle Ages, when people did not consider the God of heaven and god of love incompatible. This combination is manifest not only in the unicorn himself and in the flora throughout the Cloisters series, but also in the many remarkably lifelike birds and beasts assembled before the fountain.

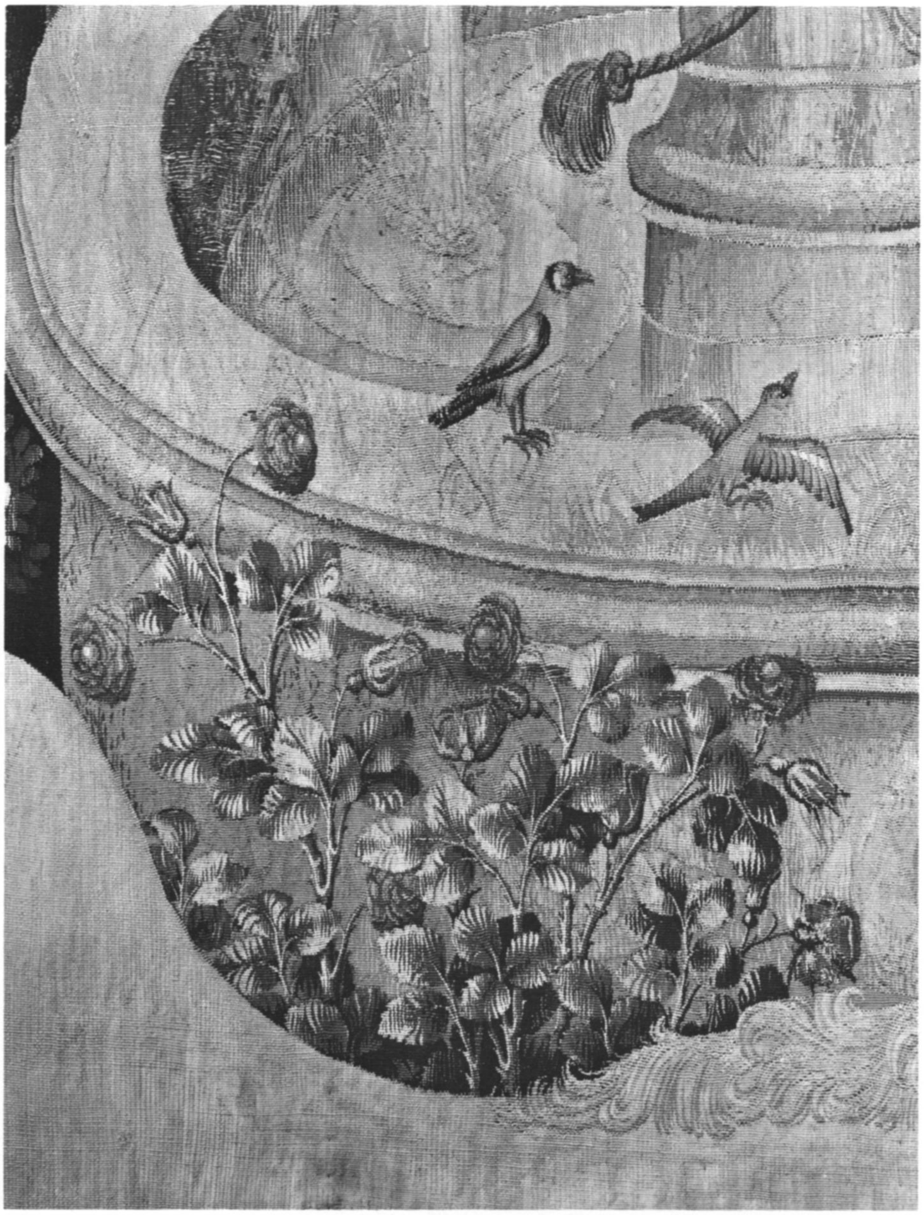






Above: The most appealing birds in the second tapestry are the paired pheasants on the fountain's edge, the male fascinated by his reflection. The fountain filled with clear water may symbolize "the mirror without blemish," a simile applied to the Virgin and also to the loved one on earth.

Right: Then there is this perky little rabbit. Renowned for its fertility, the animal is appropriate in a tapestry supposedly woven for a marriage, particularly for a medieval marriage in which two people were wed partly for the purpose of producing heirs to carry on the family name.



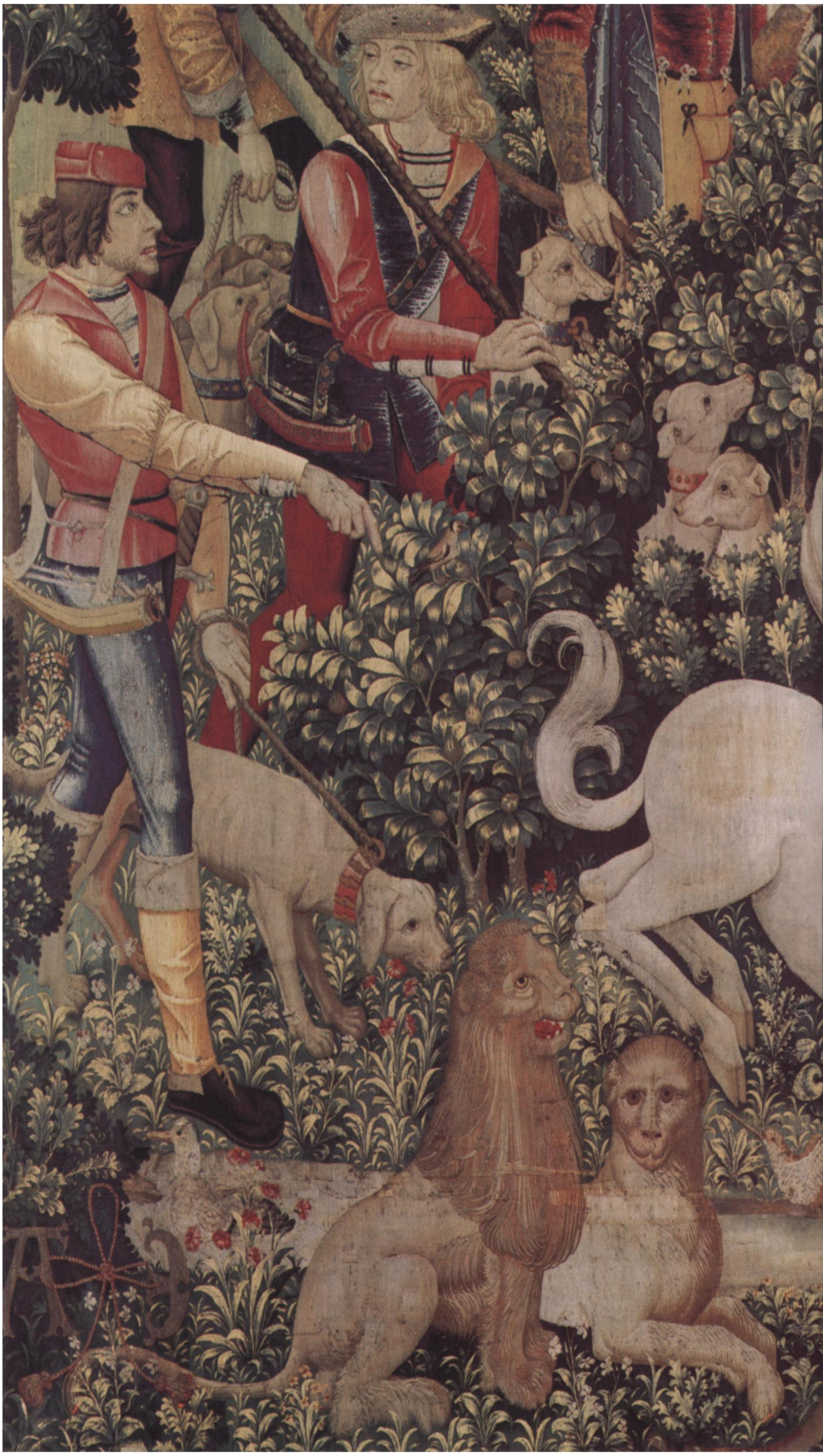
Above: Fertility is also a characteristic of the goldfinch. Two are in the center of the tapestry: an adult stands on the rim of the fountain, a fledgling, wings outspread, is nearby. According to Pliny, the first-century writer and authority on natural history, "the goldfinch, though a very small bird, produces a dozen little ones." Its diet of thorns and thistle seeds associated it with the crown of thorns, and thus Christ's Passion and man's Redemption. People in the Middle Ages had a special affection for the elegant little goldfinch; they loved watching it fly wild and free in the woods or even taming it to keep as a household pet.

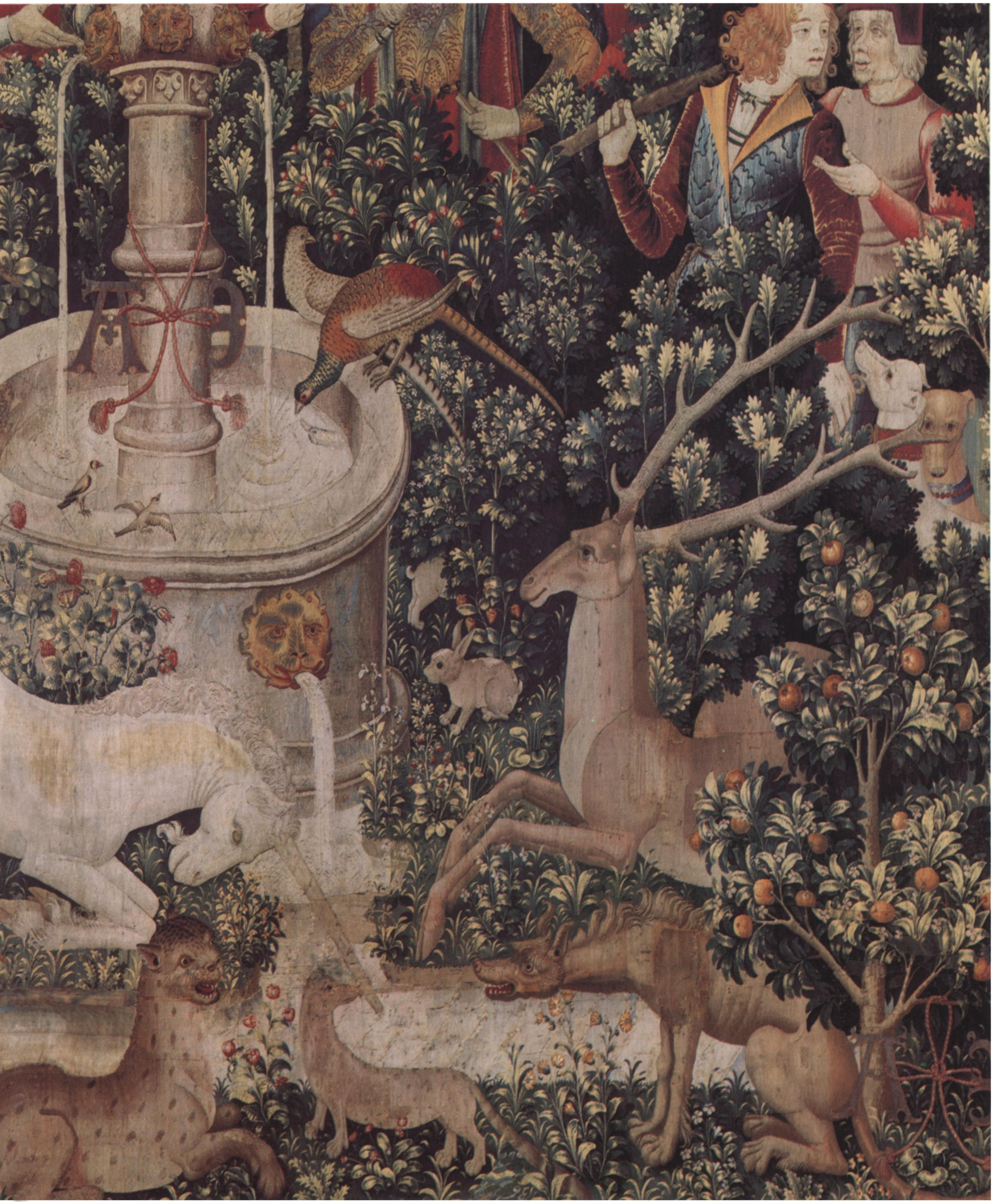
Overleaf: Among the animals lining the bank sit a regal lion and lioness. Courageous and merciful to his flock, the king of beasts is, like the unicorn, a symbol of Christ. He also stands for fidelity in love, making it more than coincidental that the lion in the tapestry has his mate beside him.
At the right is a stag, killer of serpents and here representing Christ in his special role as destroyer of evil. The stag may also be included because of his popularity as an animal of the chase. The panther in the center of the group stands for both Christ and the lover because of his beauty and good temper. The small creature to

his right is perhaps a genet, whose long, lithe body and ringed tail were surely visually appealing to the designer. The genet is sometimes confused with the weasel, which might be the case here: the weasel, like him, is courageous and, like the deer, an enemy of serpents. He turns his head in surprise at a hideous hyena, reputed in bestiaries to be fierce and filthy. Its presence among the virtuous animals is not strange, for medieval artists often placed diabolical creatures next to those symbolizing man's finer qualities.

The inconspicuous bird poised on a bush at the left of the fountain is probably a nightingale, from whose small drab body rings out the famed and glorious song. The female was supposed to sing as she warmed her eggs through sleepless nights, a model for the poor but honest working woman who lightened her troubles by singing. But more pertinent to the tapestry, perhaps, is the nightingale's long association with springtime, the burgeoning earth, and lovers.

The lush flora forms a lovely, restful ambience. The orange tree at the lower right is associated, as are all fruit trees, with fertility. It is also directly related to the unicorn ridding the stream of venom, since people in the Middle Ages believed that by drinking a concoction of citrus seeds, hot water, and wine, one becomes immune to poison. Appropriately, this same association exists for much of the other flora, probably to underline the religious symbolism of the purification of the stream: the fruit of the medlar tree to the left of the unicorn, the flowering sage plant at the right of the fountain, and the bright yellow marigolds near the hyena – when consumed, all resist poison either alone or combined with other ingredients. The wild pansies at the lymerer's feet have petals of three colors; for this reason in the Middle Ages the flower signified the Holy Trinity. The word pansy in French is *pensée* meaning thought, implying thought of the beloved in the language of love.





The Third Tapestry: The Unicorn Leaps the Stream

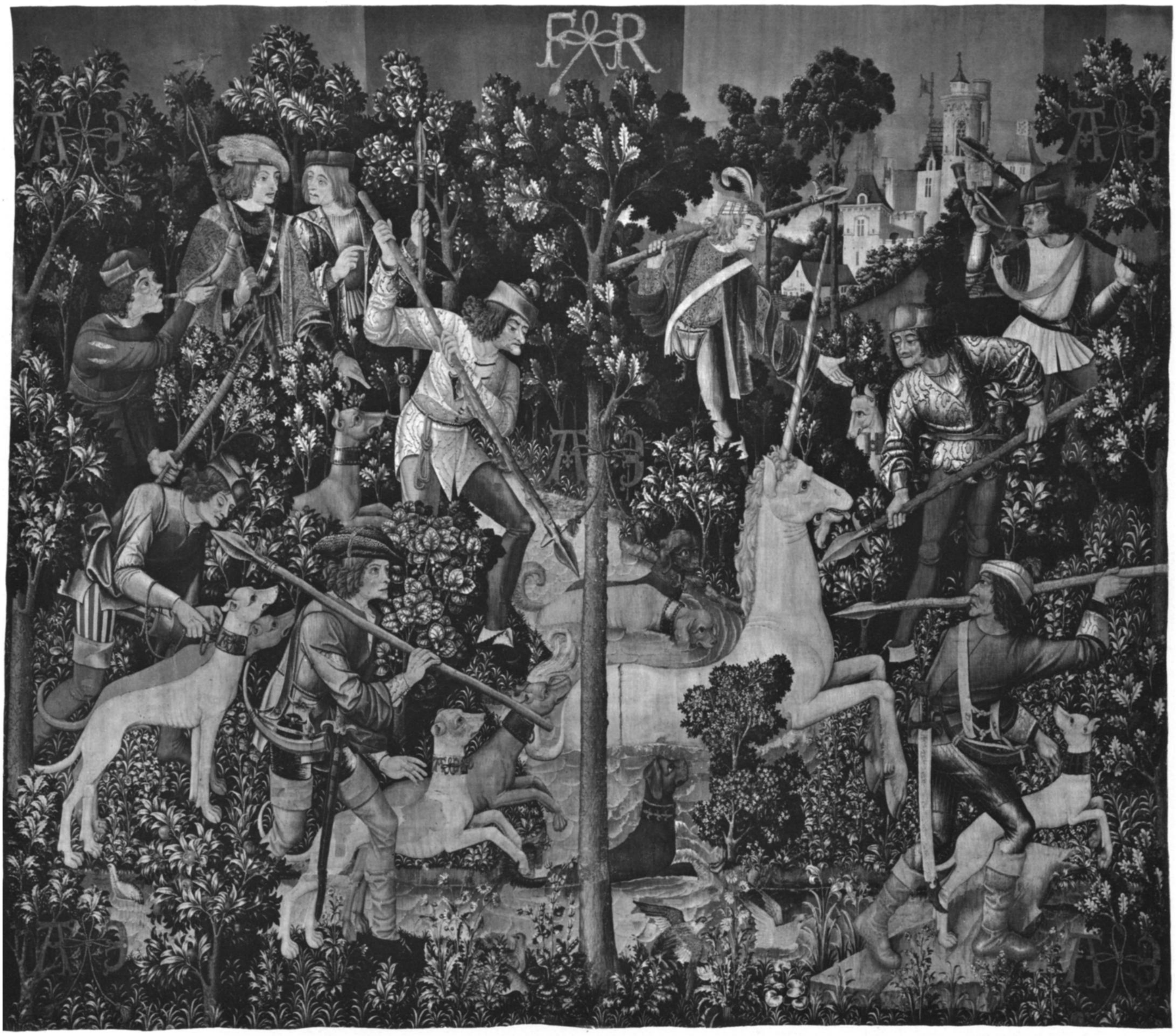
The serene atmosphere of the first two tapestries has suddenly changed. This scene is highly charged with action, the hunt well under way. Many dogs are now on the unicorn's trail; most medieval writers on hunting agreed that the more hounds the better the chase. Huntsmen are positioned, spears upraised, along the banks of the stream that the unicorn nimbly leaps in a valiant effort to elude his attackers.

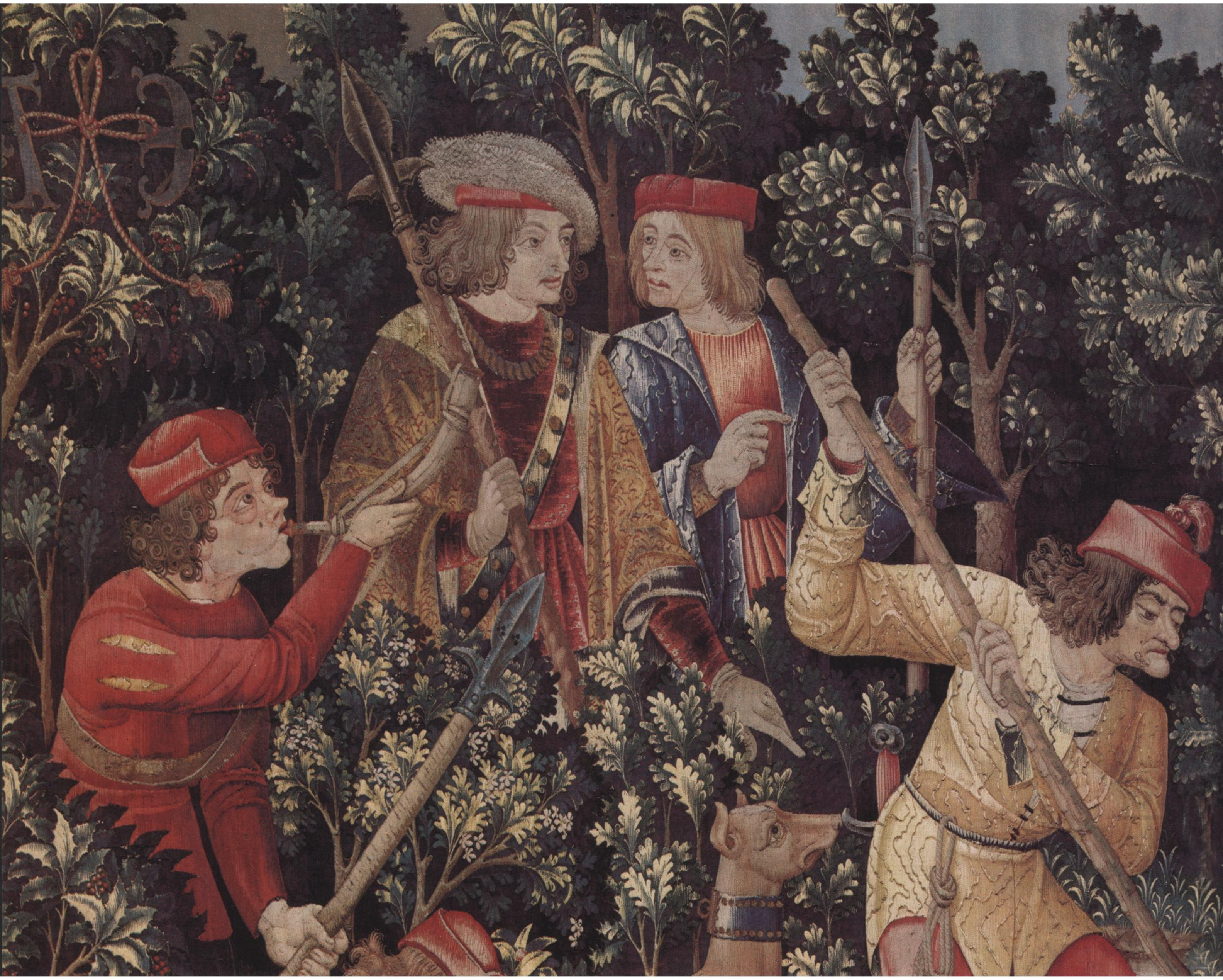
The animal's plunging into a stream is not an unusual occurrence in a medieval stag hunt: when a stag becomes weary and overheated, he refreshes himself in a cool river to relax and also to confuse his pursuers by concealing his tracks. But, alas, this ploy does not work for the unicorn. Head held high, he can only move from the hunters on one side of the brook to those waiting on the other.

In this tapestry the characterization of the hunters is quite different from that in the first two. There are many cruel and ugly faces; particularly conspicuous are three villainous characters about to stab the quarry with their spears. They may represent the enemies of Christ who captured and condemned him.

The drama is intensified by the tapestry's composition. The unicorn is placed off-center to emphasize his flight. The violent diagonals of the spears, the brook, and the unicorn's horn provide a feeling of movement made even more evident by the contrasting strong vertical of the oak tree placed centrally at the front. An oak is included in all but the last of the Cloisters tapestries; admired because of its strength and longevity, to many theologians it signified firmness of faith, while in the language of love it symbolized enduring relationships.

Sewn onto the sky are the letters F and R joined with a cord: possibly another key to the tapestries' ownership, they will be discussed later on.

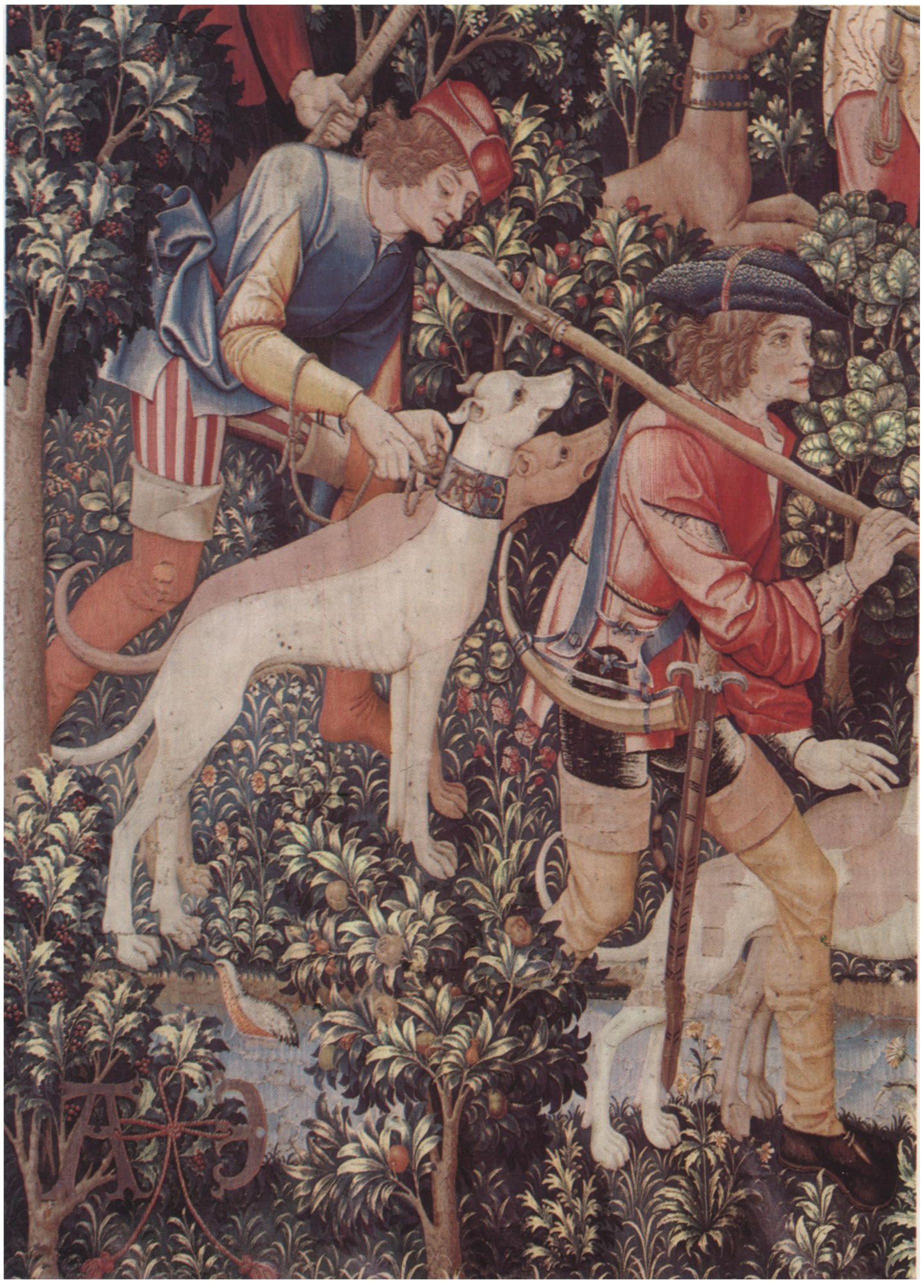

F R
A E

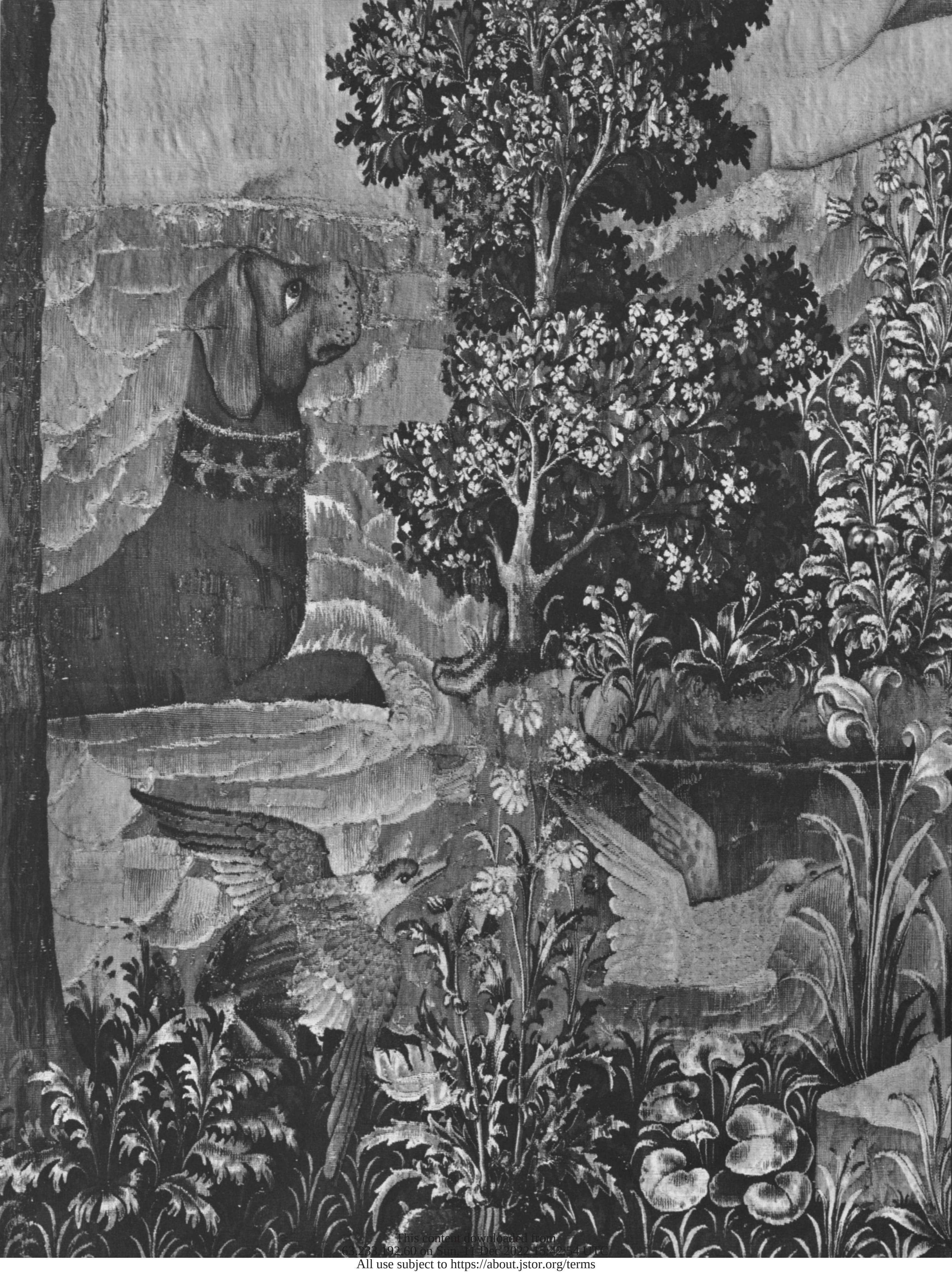


Left: The man wearing a brocaded cloak may be the *seigneur;* he seems to listen to advice from the wide-eyed companion at his side. The young man at the left vigorously blows his hunting horn. It was important for hunters to be familiar with the calls designating different stages of the chase. The one given here probably warns that the quarry has taken to the river.

Especially sinister is the fellow at the right about to plunge his spear into the unicorn. His face exudes cruelty: brows curling diabolically and pointed chin sharply jutting forward.

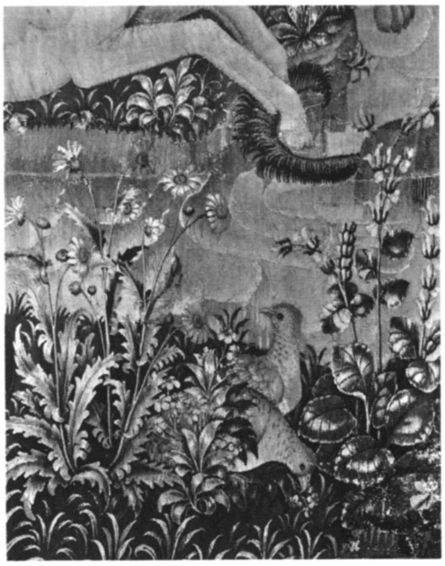
Right: A huntsman unleashes a fresh pair of greyhounds so they can join the rest of the pack; notice the AE insignia on one dog's collar. In the shallow brook just below appears a bittern, a rusty-breasted little bird. To the right of him is a pomegranate tree. Its luscious ripe fruit, filled with a multitude of seeds, is frequently used by artists as a symbol of fertility. According to some theologians the pomegranate stands for Christ himself: just as one must cut deeply into the fruit to extract its precious juice, so must one penetrate the innermost suffering of Christ to comprehend the sacrifice of his blood.





Opposite: Paddling through the stream, gaze intent upon his prey, is this scenting hound with floppy ears, flat muzzle, and collar adorned with fleurs-de-lis. He seems totally oblivious of the mallard heading toward the water where another duck, a white one, has already settled. Silhouetted against the unicorn's body is an exquisite hawthorn tree in flower. Many people in the Middle Ages believed Christ's crown of thorns was made of prickly hawthorn branches. The hawthorn was also connected with May Day festivities and with the joys of springtime and love. In Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale,* the courtly lover Arcita, "to do reverence to May," hastens to a grove "to make him there the garland that one weaves of woodbine . . . and green hawthorn leaves."

The primroses just to the right of the hawthorn were often called "keys of heaven" or "St. Peter's keys." Among the earliest spring flowers, they too were associated with the merry celebrations of May. A medieval herbalist wrote that distilled primrose water is a calming influence for mad dogs. The field daisies blooming at the bank near the ducks have round golden centers of such clarity and brilliance that people in medieval times sometimes called the flower "eye of Christ." They were used as a cure for "devil's love," or excessive sexual desire that leads to infidelity in marriage. The long sharp leaves of the yellow flag to the right have been compared to swords, and indeed the flower is alternatively called sword lily. In the tapestry perhaps they relate to the huntsmen's spears. Medicinally, yellow flag is supposedly an effective cure for the aches and pains of pregnancy.



Above: These plump partridges, quietly vigilant, might have suggested several meanings to the medieval observer. Bestiaries called them lustful, said they often stole other birds' eggs, and associated them with the devil. In this sense they may allude to the evil huntsmen charging the unicorn. Partridges have always been renowned for their cleverness: they use dust and shrubs as protective camouflage and coax people away from their nests by scuttling off with a feigned injury. Surrounding them in the tapestry are marigolds at the left and clary to the right, a flowering herb thought to be an aphrodisiac, an aid in plucking out thorns from flesh, and, when mixed with honey, an antidote to poison.

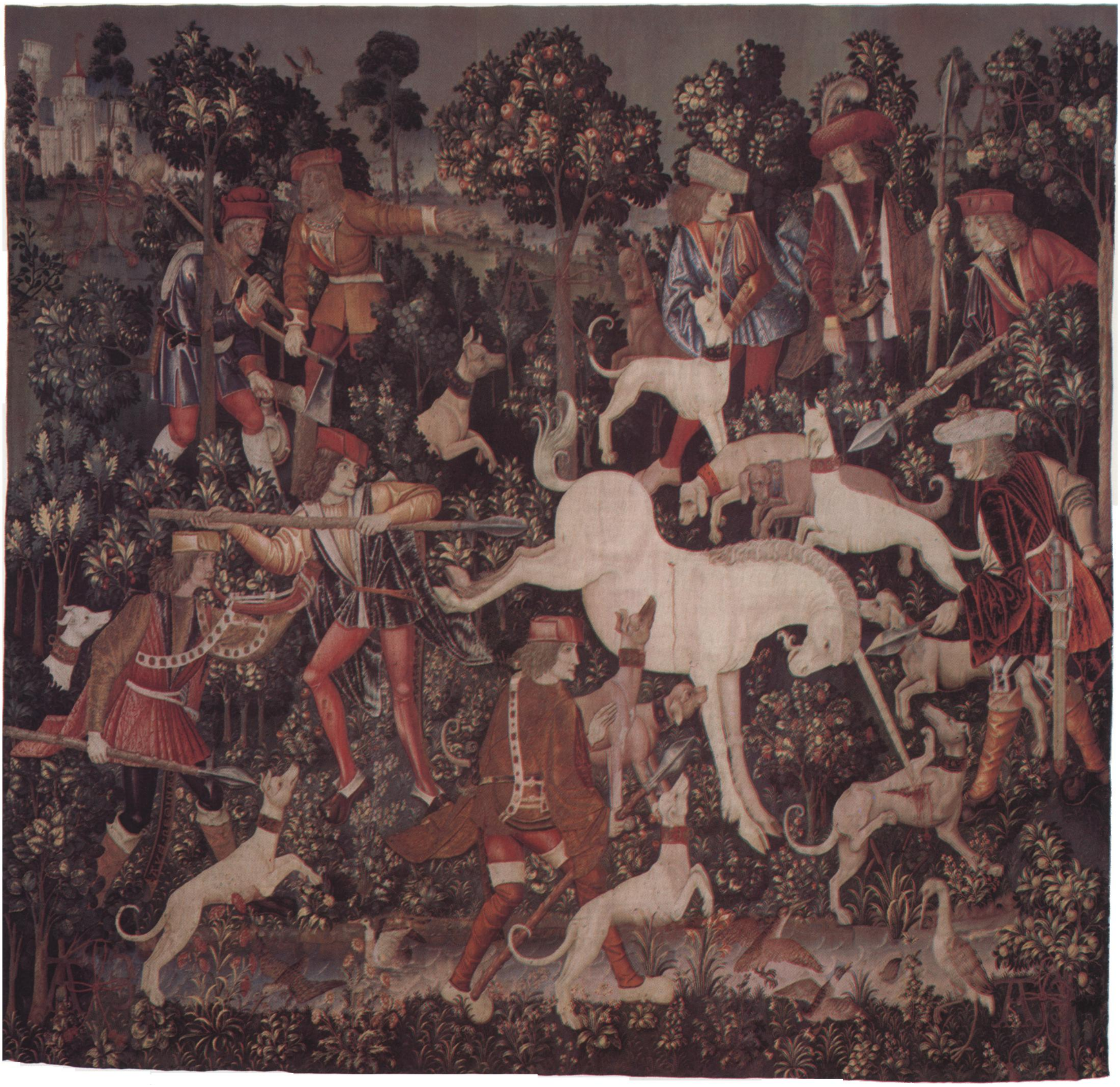
The Fourth Tapestry:
The Unicorn Defends Himself

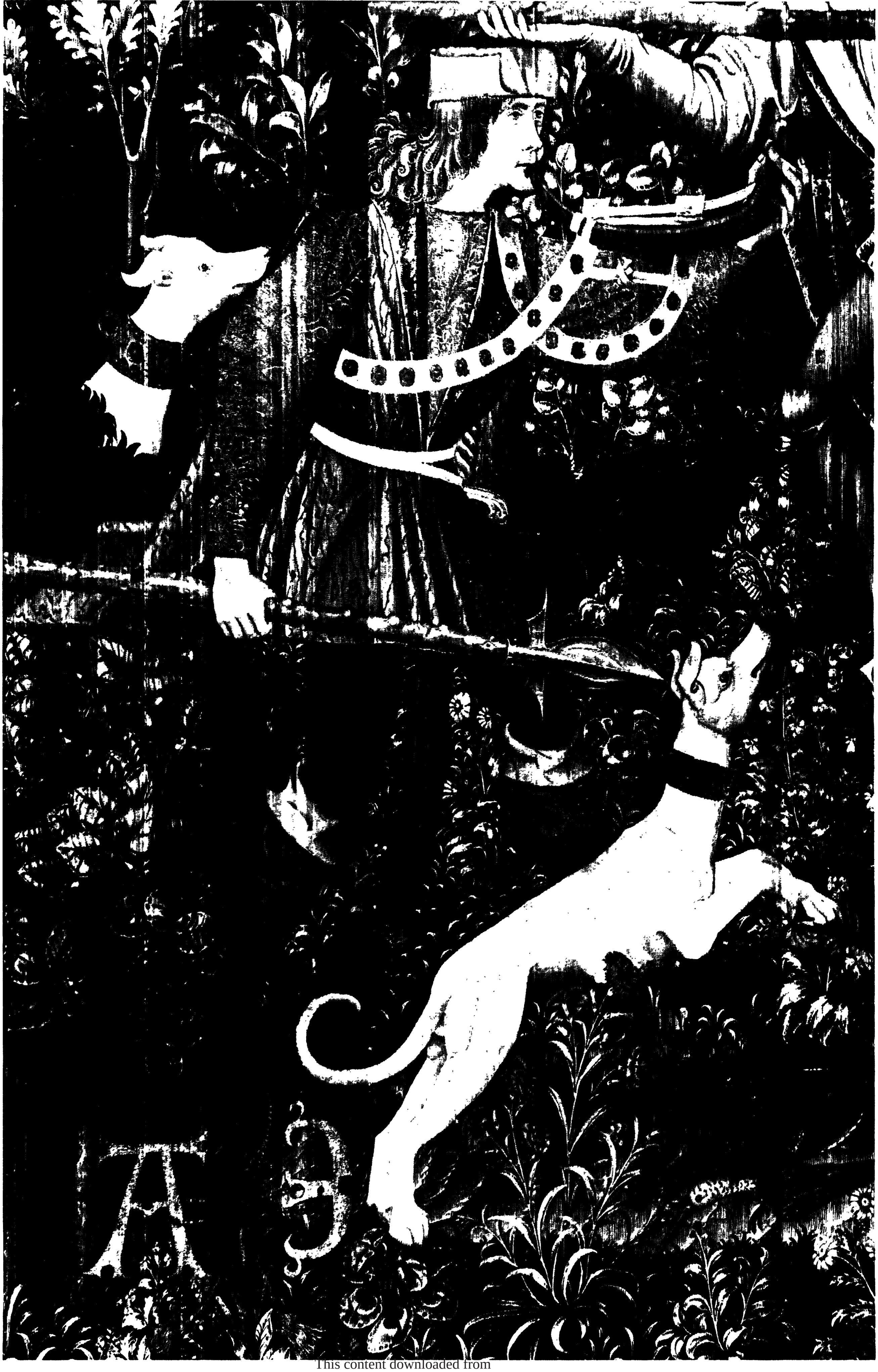
The frenzied pace of the hunt reaches its peak in this scene where the unicorn, nearly overtaken by his pursuers, violently defends himself. Ctesias, a Greek physician who lived around 400 B.C., was the first to write about the unicorn. In his description of the beast he says: "They fight with thrusts of horn; they kick, bite, and strike with wounding force both horses and hunters." In this tapestry the unicorn, with the same savagery, gores a greyhound and almost topples a hunter with a kick from both hind legs. Between this hunter's feet is the feverfew, a plant that can "bring broken bones together and heal them."

Adding to the turmoil are the huntsmen, lunging at the unicorn with pointed spears, and the curly-tailed hounds – some leaping toward him, others crouching ready to spring. One elegant greyhound is restrained by his master who, quite understandably, does not want his favorite hound wounded. This time the strong central motif – an orange tree – is set far back, not subduing or interfering with the tumult.

The characters do not all actively participate in the attack. The gentleman in the plumed hat is the *seigneur*. Unlike the others, his face is sensitive and compassionate as he quietly watches the fearsome spectacle. To the left are two peasants, an aged man carrying refreshments and a woodsman who has just cut down a tree. They are newcomers to the group, as is the figure blowing his horn who personifies the angel Gabriel.

An older, gray-haired huntsman, furry hat tied under his chin, is courageous enough to come within touching distance of the unicorn's head. A hunter pointing his spear stands beside the *seigneur*, a bit apprehensive and keeping a cautious distance from the combat. The others move in for the kill as if they believe their target is an ordinary stag. They seem not to realize that the unicorn cannot be taken by force but only by guile, his capture possible only after he is tamed by a maiden.





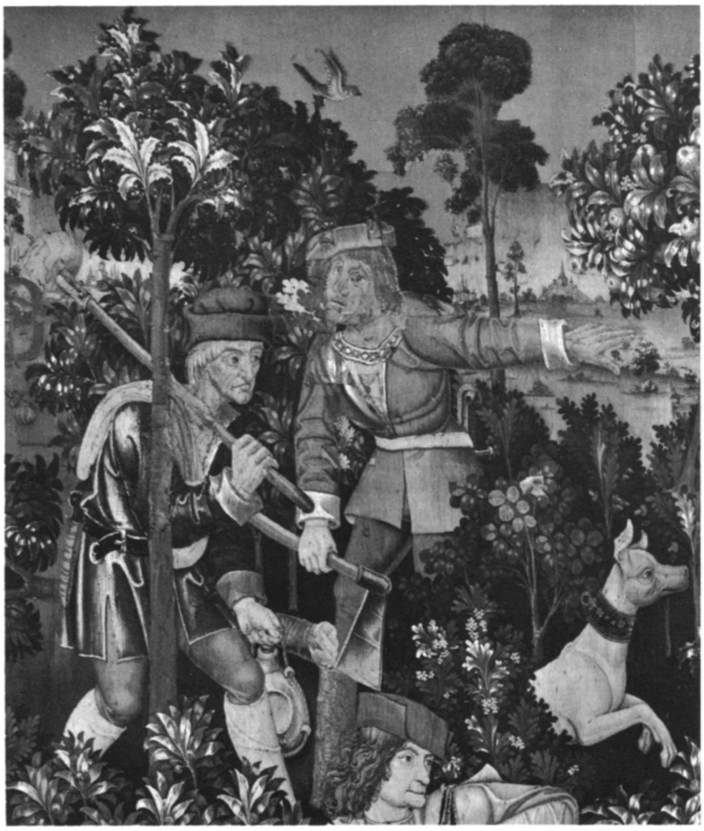
Opposite: This imposing figure, cheeks puffed out as he sounds his horn, represents Gabriel, angel of the Annunciation. The scabbard of his sword bears the Latin inscription *Ave Regina C[oelorum]*, "Hail, Queen of the Heavens." To be sure, in the biblical account Gabriel greeted the Virgin Mary with the familiar, "Hail Mary, full of grace"; but the "Ave Regina Coelorum" was a popular hymn to the Virgin in the Middle Ages and would have been understood as a substitute. Gabriel alone among the hunters fully comprehends the meaning of this vehement pursuit. As messenger of God he now comes to proclaim that the unicorn is Christ and that the animal's eventual submission to the virgin maid is an allegory of the Annunciation and Incarnation.

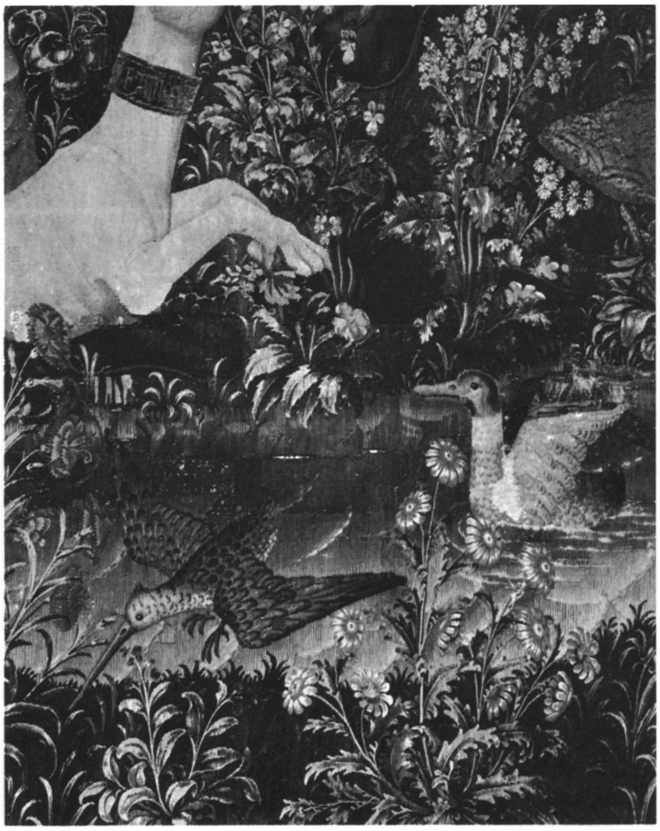
Near the left tassel of the AE insignia is a cluster of forget-me-nots. The very name of the flower – in old French *ne m'oubliez mye* or "do not forget me" – indicates its significance for lovers. One fifteenth-century poet asks it "to greet for me with God in heart, the one who is my love." Forget-me-nots are usually blue, in the Middle Ages the color of fidelity: accordingly, a German poet describes the blossom as one "whose color shines in steadfastness."

Below, left: The old man carries a flask in one hand and over his hunched shoulder is a bundle wrapped in cloth fastened to a staff. He is, in all likelihood, supplying food and drink for the huntsmen to enjoy at the end of the strenuous chase.

The woodsman beside him clutches an ax; he has just felled a beech tree, highly prized for its timber that quickly kindles into a blazing fire. He may be preparing firewood, a traditional reward for the huntsman who successfully tracked the stag to his lair. One medieval writer describing a royal hunt says that when the king asks who discovered the stag the master huntsman replies, "A man who is most valuable for sport . . . he requires an arpent of wood." The king then commands, "Give him three." Behind the two rustic fellows stretches an extensive vista of grasslands, trees, a lake, and in the distance a building with spires.

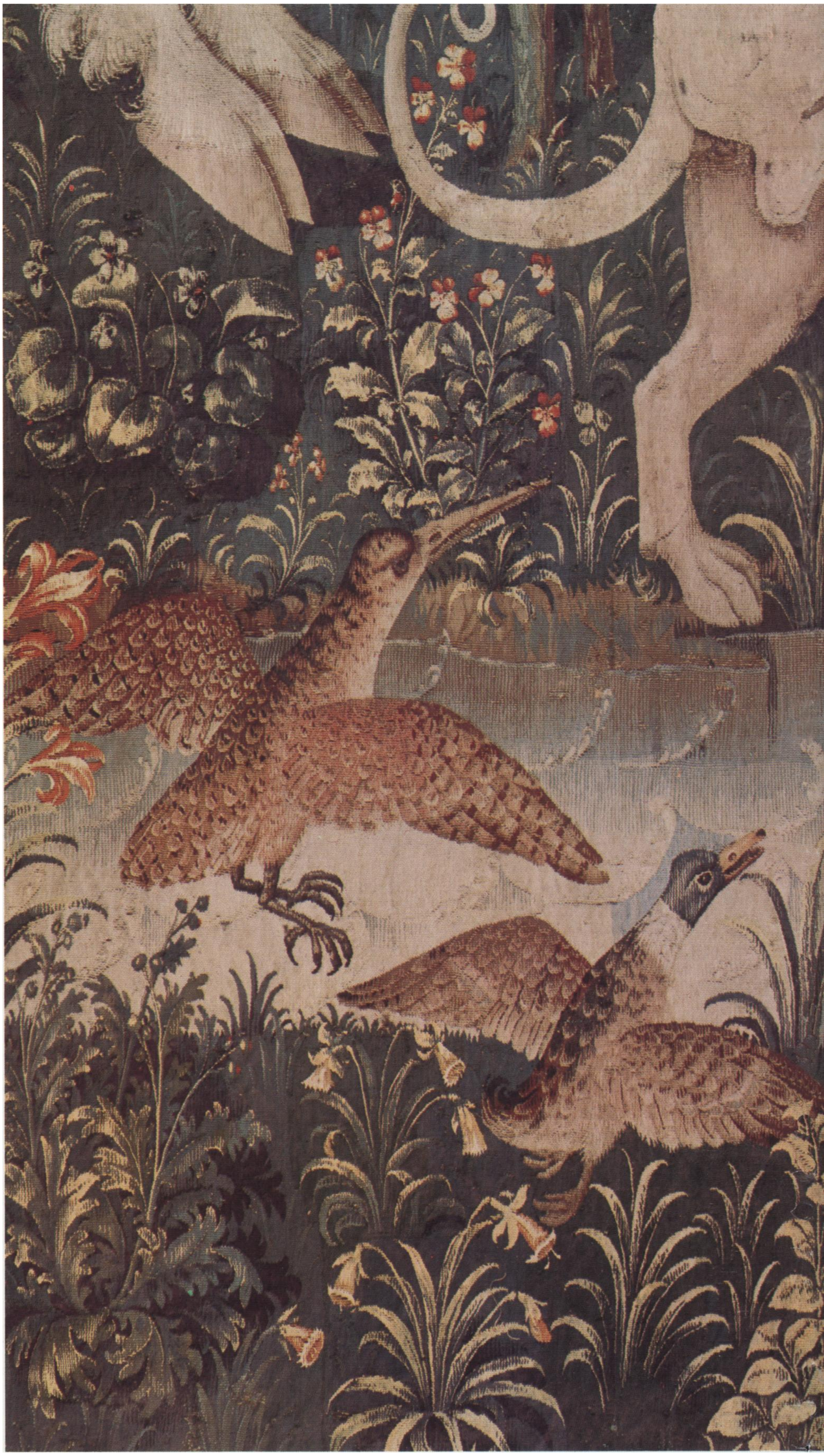
Below, right: The bird with the long pointed bill hovering nervously over the stream is a woodcock. Both he and the mallard duck frantically flapping his wings are visibly alarmed at the commotion and contribute to the flurry of excitement all about them.

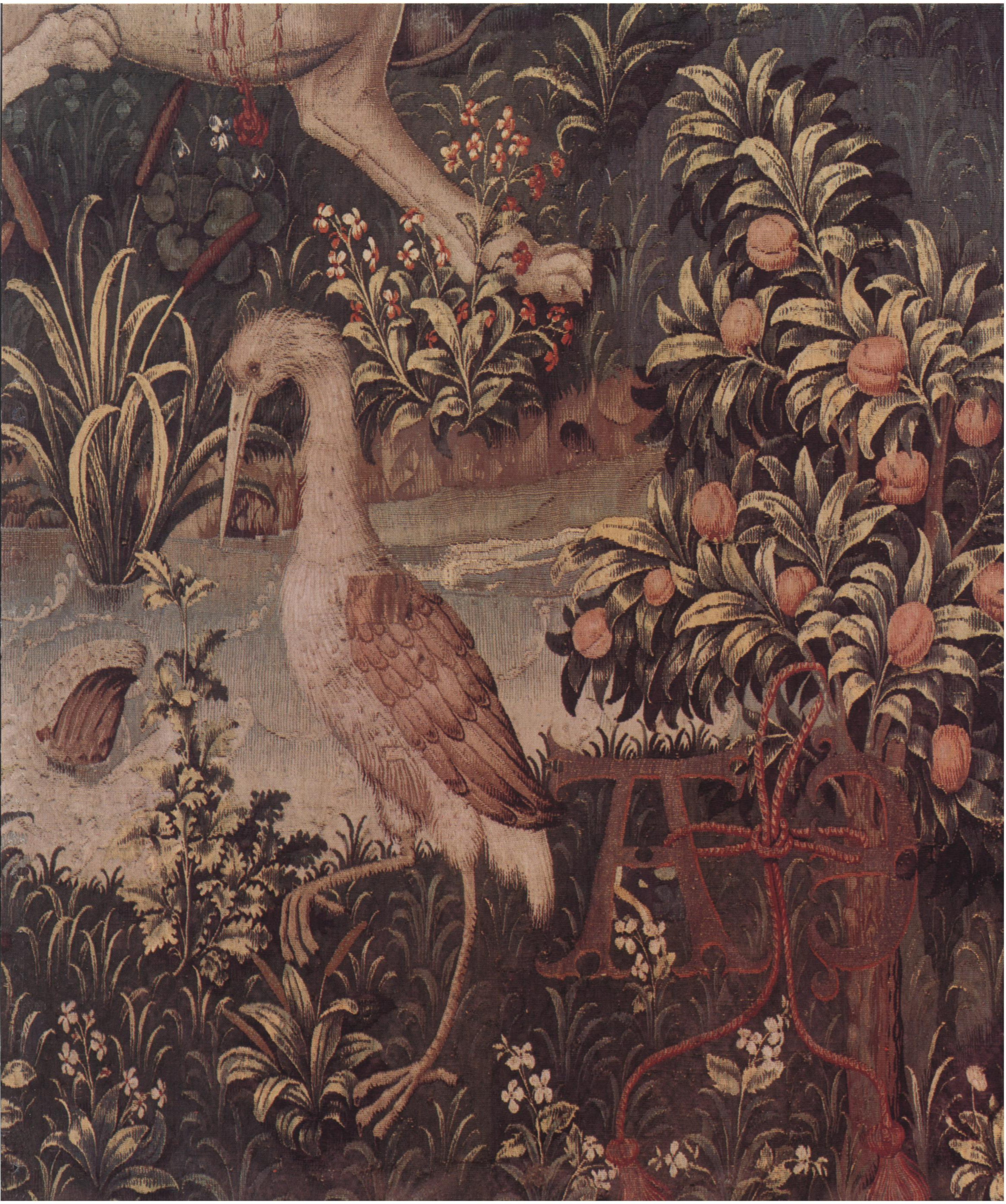




On the bank, in ironic contrast to the intense activity, a stately heron stands calm and motionless on one leg. He seems entirely unconcerned about the hectic goings-on of the hunt. It is said that herons, noted for their lofty flight, fear storms and soar above them; thus they are a kind of weather vane, signaling the possibility of rain. In a religious sense, these birds often signify the "souls of the elect." Fearing the terrestrial deeds of the devil, they seek on high "the serenity of heaven where they may behold forever the countenance of God."

At the right is a peach tree, its succulent fruit considered an aphrodisiac and effective in inducing passion in "men that are impotent because of a cold nature." The cattail across the stream was thought by some to be the reed the soldiers forced Christ to carry as a scepter when they were mocking him. Just behind the woodcock is a thistle plant, always related to the crown of thorns; in art and literature it is often a symbolic "defender" of maidenhood.



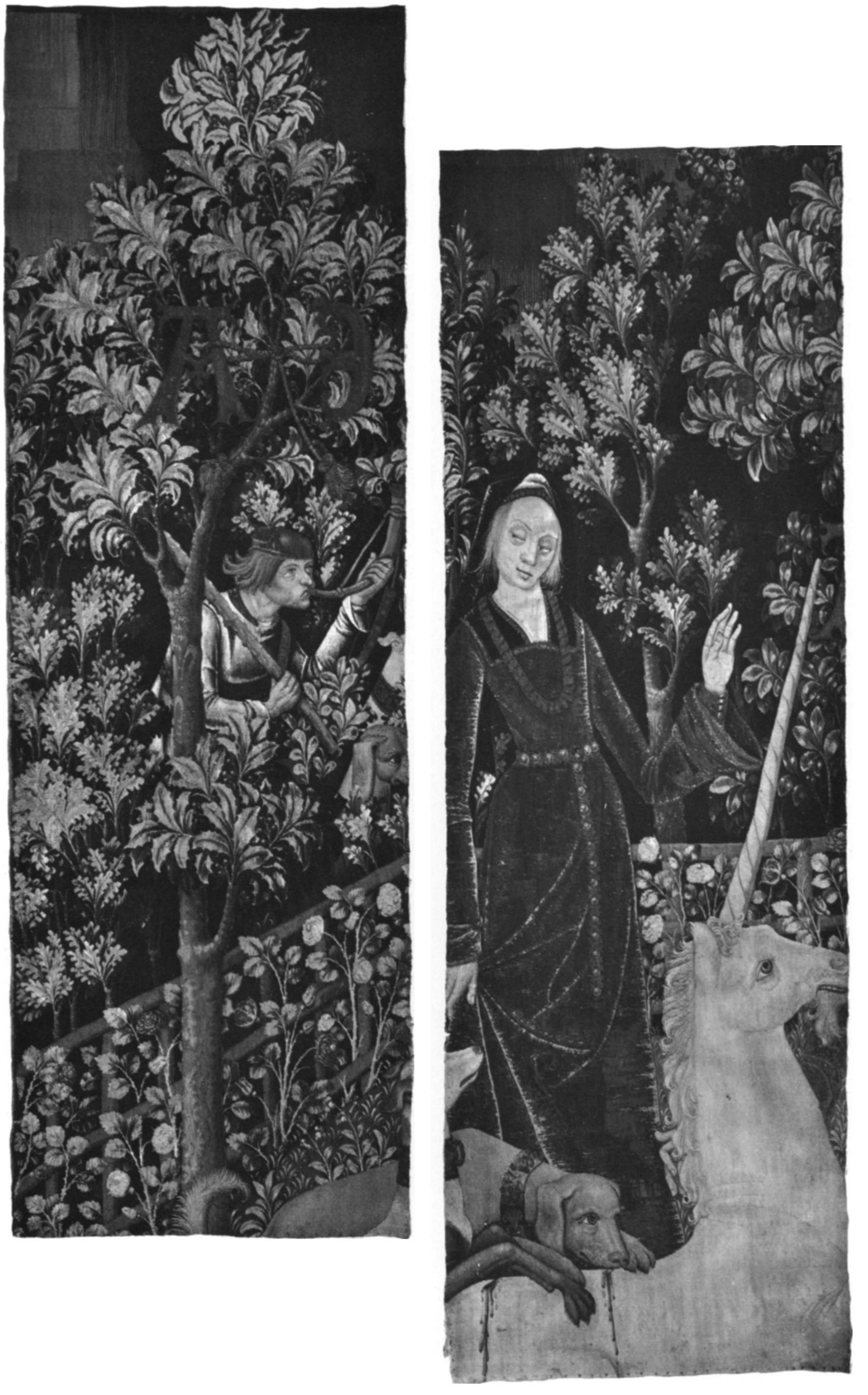


Fragments from the Fifth Tapestry: The Unicorn Is Captured by the Maiden

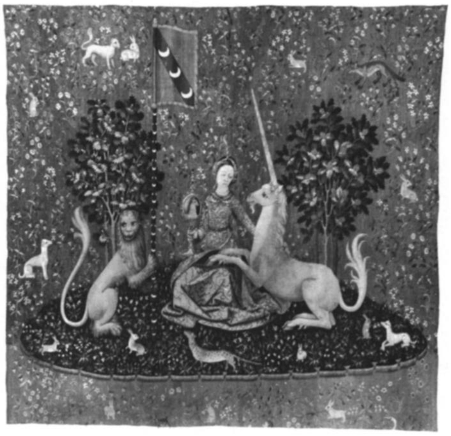
Although only two fragments remain from the fifth tapestry, it is obvious from them that the huntsmen no longer try to capture their quarry by force and have resorted to the ruse of the virgin maid. All that is visible of the maiden is a bit of her brocaded sleeve and her hand delicately caressing the unicorn's mane. Her pert lady companion beckons, apparently to the hunter blowing his horn, to signal that the unicorn may now be taken. It is impossible to reconstruct the scene as a whole, but its atmosphere was undoubtedly one of quiet and peace.

The maiden and the unicorn are within the *hortus conclusus*, a garden surrounded by a fence. In the Middle Ages such an enclosure was considered a symbol of chastity. In these fragments the rectangular garden is bounded by wooden railings and a hedge of roses plentifully supplied with thorns.

One of the trees in the fragments is a holly with bright red berries. Holly was used for Christmas decorations, as it is today, and was associated with the Nativity and the yuletide season. There is also an apple tree. It was probably in the center of the garden; its fruit, unlike any other in the tapestries, is enriched with silver-gilt threads, indicating a special importance. One writer calls the shade of the apple tree the Holy Spirit that overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation. This interpretation makes it appropriate for the coming of the unicorn to the maid, or, symbolically, of Christ to the Virgin, to take place under an apple tree. The apple is also rich in erotic symbolism. Since the unicorn beguiled by the maiden represented the lover captivated by his beloved, the apple tree in the Cloisters tapestry may well suggest the sweetness of worldly love. Since the apple was considered the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden and the holly with its sharp leaves a symbol of Christ's Passion, the two together may signify the whole drama of the Fall and Redemption.



Below: Illustrated here is one of a famed series of tapestries, The Lady with the Unicorn, in the Cluny Museum in Paris. The set describes the five senses, and this particular tapestry the sense of sight. A lovely lady holds a mirror before the unicorn who admires himself with obvious satisfaction. The work's composition may approximate that of the now-fragmentary Cloisters tapestry: the position of the lady's hand and arm, her elegantly brocaded dress, and the angle of the unicorn's head and horn are quite similar to corresponding features remaining in the Cloisters fragment.



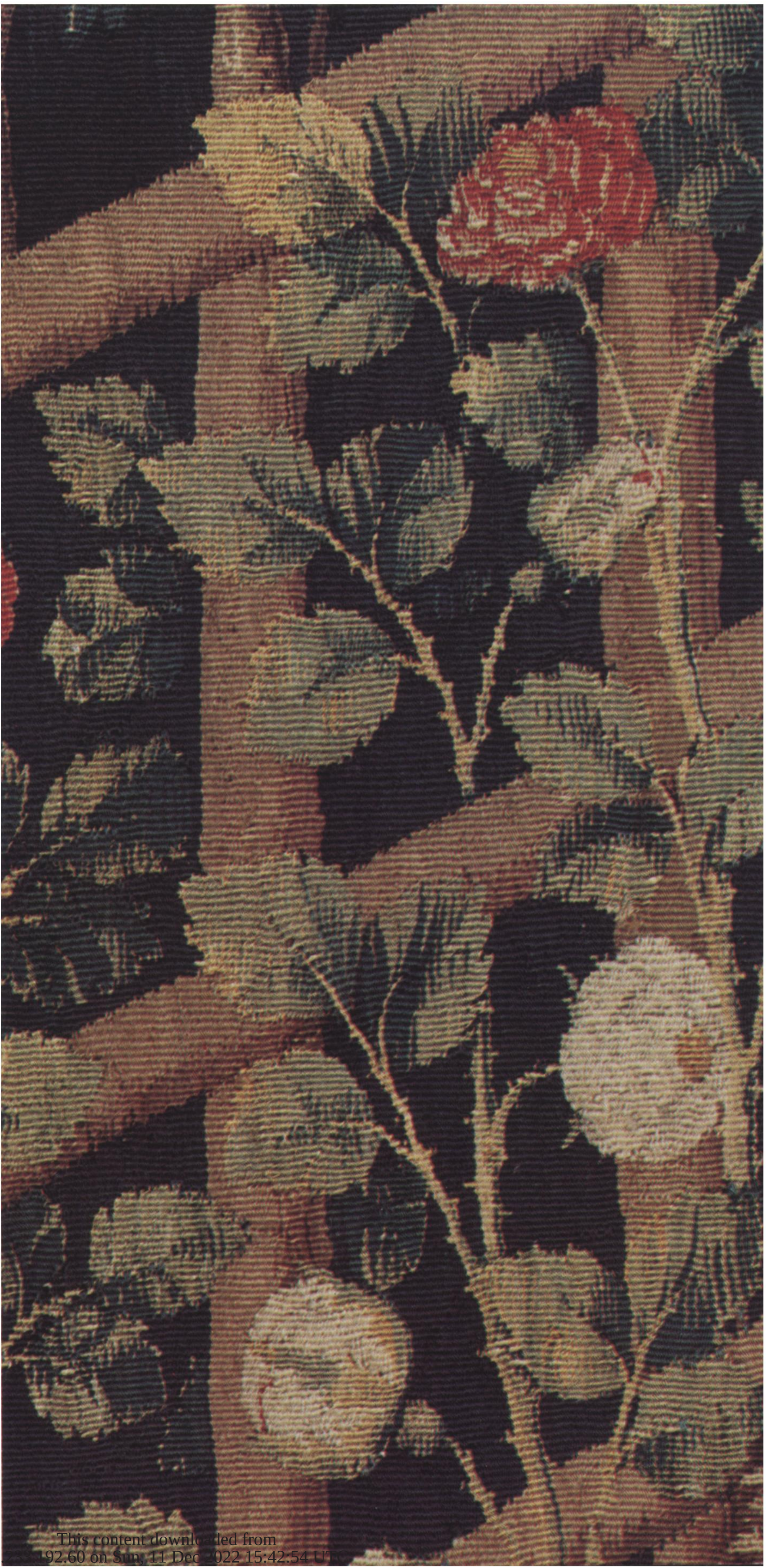
Photograph: Réunion des Musées Nationaux

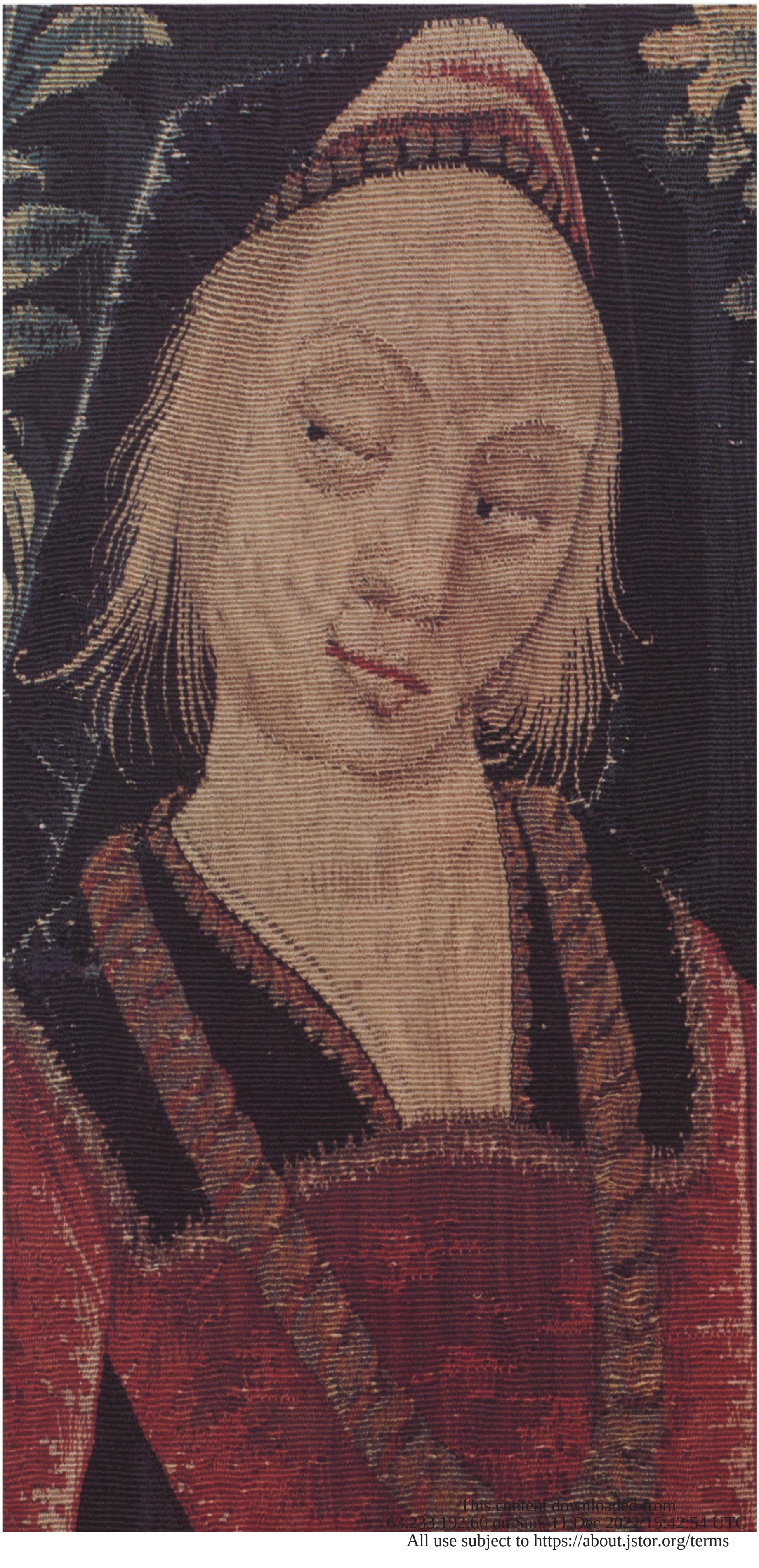
Roses were probably the best-loved of all medieval flowers – for their beauty, fragrance, and symbolism. Around the tapestry's enclosed garden grows a profusion of roses, both white and red.

Medieval associations with roses are myriad. Supposedly roses grew in the Garden of Eden without thorns until after the sin of Adam and Eve; virgins in heaven were thought to spend leisure time gathering them. In the third century, St. Cyprian exhorted Christians to die for their faith and win the "red crown of roses." Since then the red rose has always been a martyr's symbol. The flower was related to Christ's wounds by the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux who said: "Look at his feet and his hands; do you not see roses?" Bernard was one of the first to attribute the rose particularly to the Virgin: "Mary, the rose, was white through her virginity, red through her charity . . . white by her love of God, and red by her compassion for those who are near her."

The rose as symbol of the beloved or of sensual pleasure was used repeatedly by medieval poets and writers of love allegories. A thirteenth-century "wandering scholar" wrote to his lady:

Take thou this rose, O rose,
Since love's own flower it is,
And by that rose
Thy lover captive is.





This intriguingly seductive damsel is an unusual addition to the scene: rarely was a woman attendant depicted at the unicorn's capture. This girl's sly expression may hint at the unicorn's betrayal.

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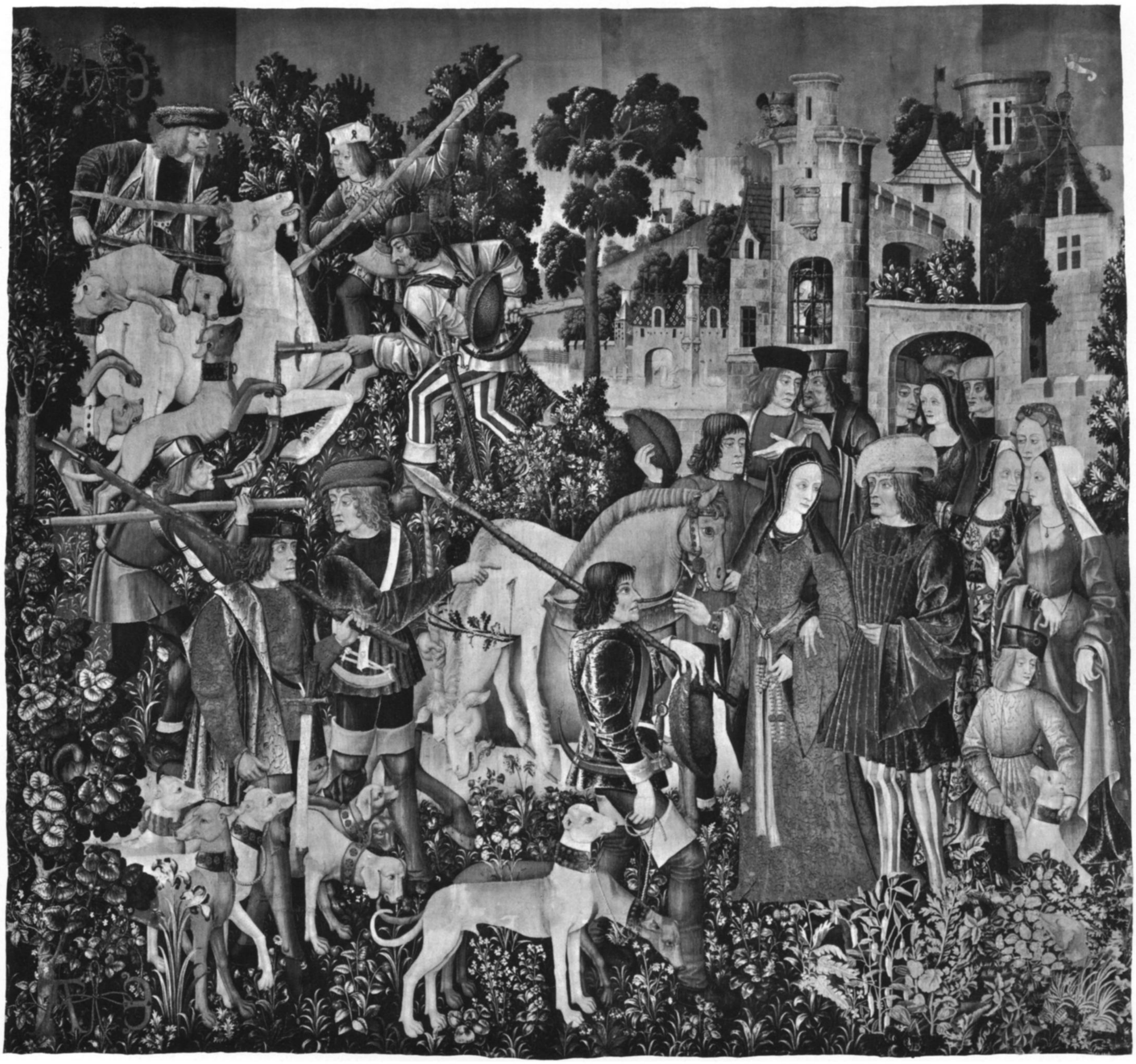
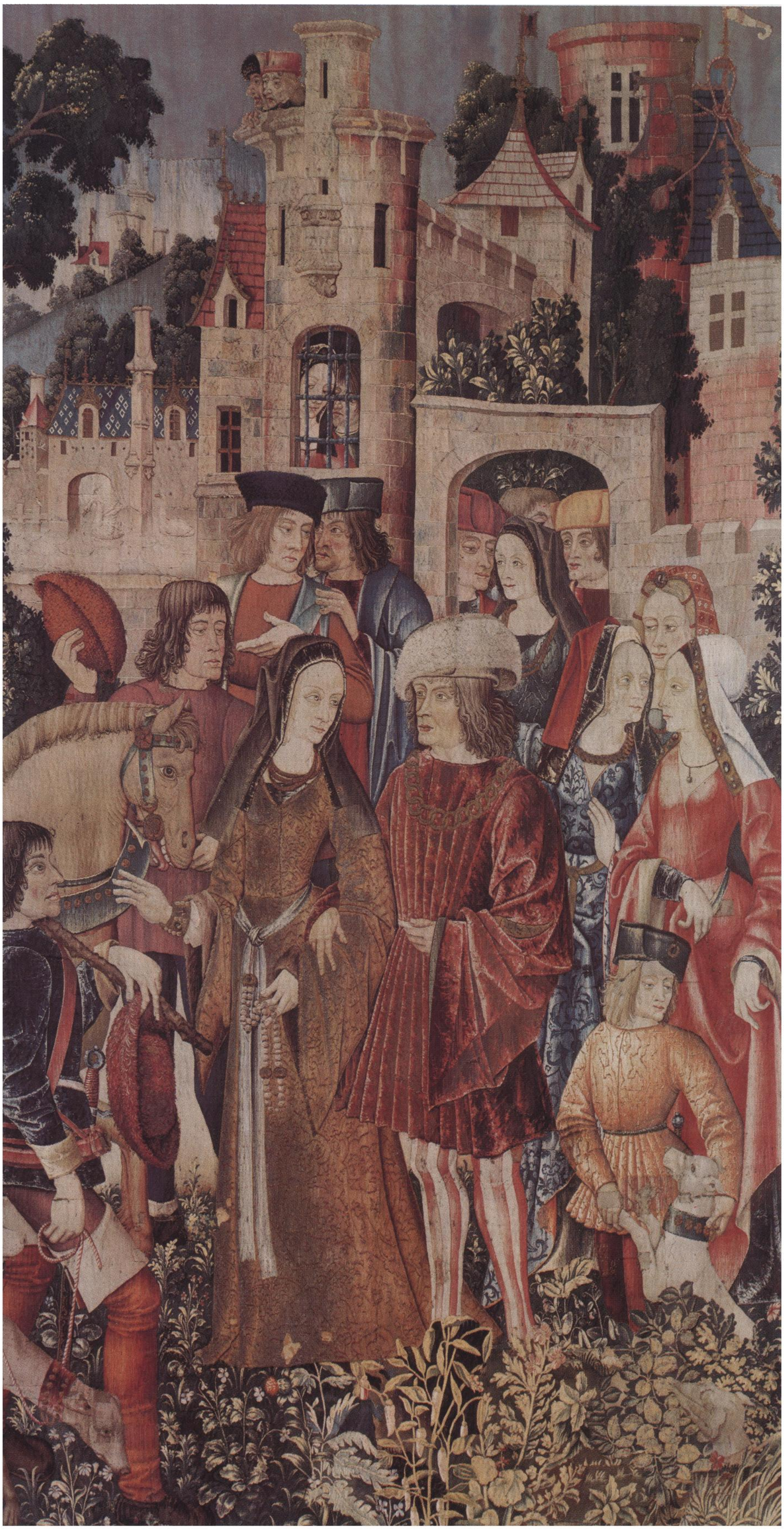
The Sixth Tapestry:
The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle

In this tapestry two important episodes of the unicorn legend occur. Each differs from the other in locale, content, and mood. At the upper left in a woodland setting, huntsmen kill the animal in a powerfully dramatic expression of brutality. In the traditional stag hunt the death of the deer was always heralded on the hunting horn. Here the figure of the hunter who sounds the signal, or *prise*, forms a transition between the bloody killing and the solemn cortege of hunters and hounds escorting the slain unicorn. As the entourage arrives at the castle gate, the dignified *seigneur* waits arm in arm with his lady. A huntsman, grasping the unicorn's horn, points to them as if to say, "This horn with its miraculous power is the prize of the hunt and it belongs to this man and woman." The two are ready to receive the dead beast: the lord looks quiet and confident while the lady, on the other hand, has an air of melancholy. She gazes sadly into the distance as does a boy playing with his dog. Surely aware of the religious significance of the dead unicorn, the lady fingers a rosary suspended from her sash and wears a necklace with a pendent cross.

A crowd of onlookers is present, many busy chattering and gossiping. One couple peers out from behind a barred window, and two fellows observe the procession from a high tower. The solid mass of people at the right and the sturdy masonry above bring to a halt the action of this and the preceding tapestries like the final chord of a symphony.





The central figures in this detail are the *seigneur,* who is not represented among those slaying the unicorn, and his lady. She does not appear to have witnessed the killing either, even though it was conceivably she who charmed the beast so that he could be taken: her dress is of the same color and brocaded fabric as the bit of sleeve seen on the maiden's arm in the fragment where she embraces the unicorn. Usually in medieval art the unicorn is slain while he lies in the lap of the virgin maid. In this tapestry the killing takes place in a separate scene well out of the lady's sight.

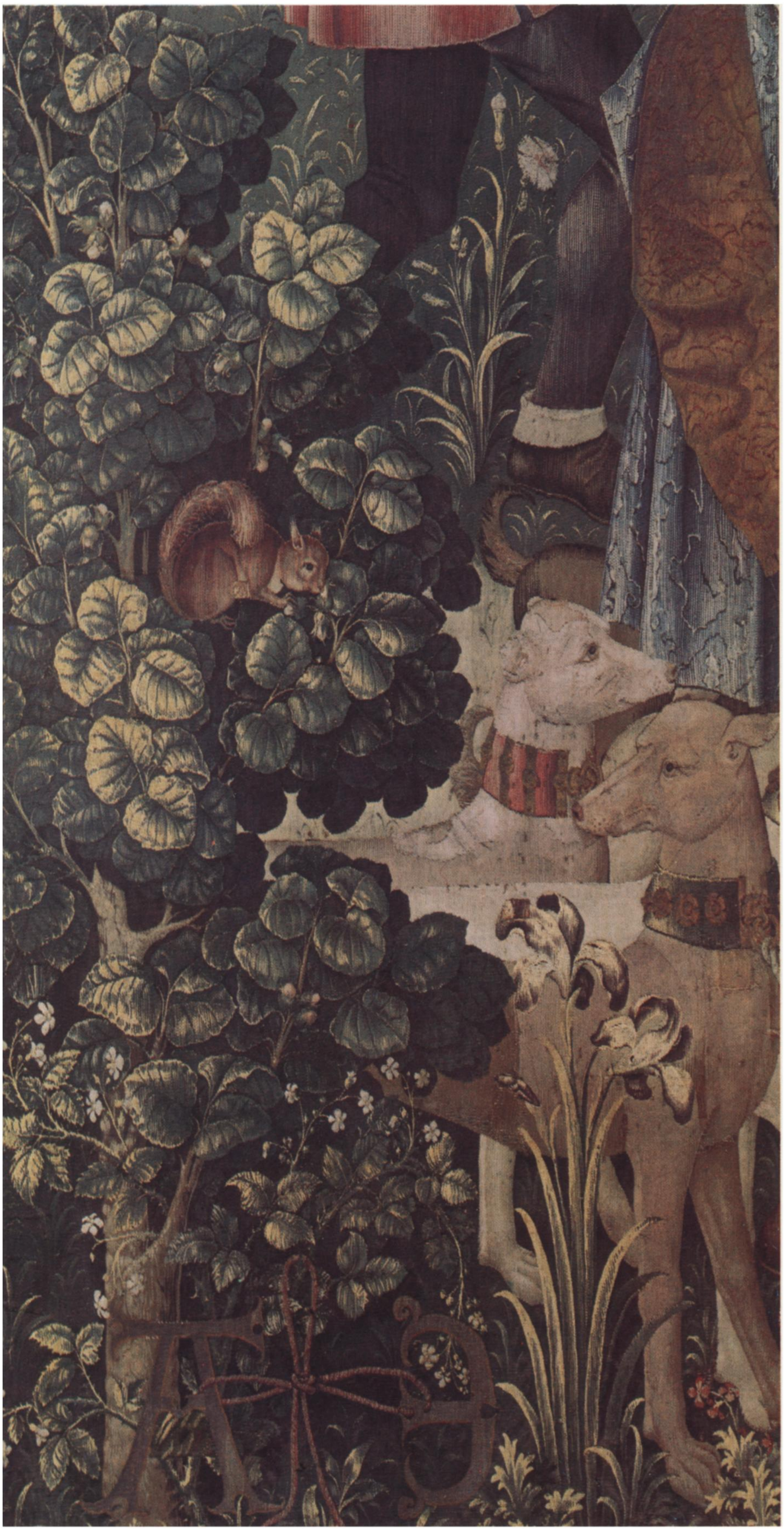
The castle, with its picturesque buildings and walls, its multicolored stonework, and its tower (really too small to accommodate the men watching on the parapet), seems more decorative than real. In the moat swim a few swans, a frequent sight around medieval castles. These birds are signs of good luck, and bestiaries say that the swan sings beautifully because of his long curved neck through which "the rich music goes round and round through the lengthy bend."

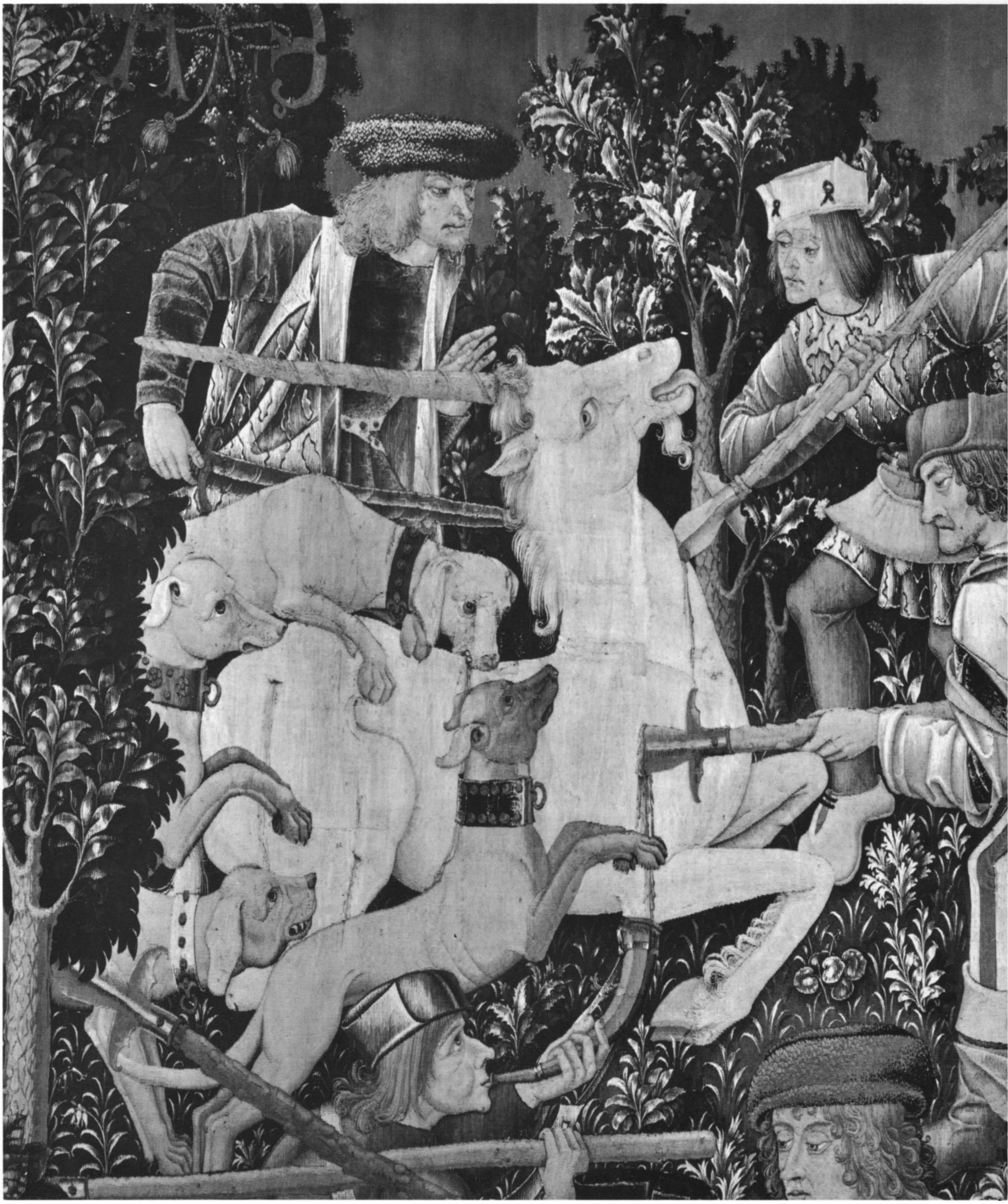
In a hazelnut tree sits an enchanting squirrel, bushy tail curved over his back. The squirrel is supposed to know danger lurks on the ground and so inhabits the treetops; one moralizing writer said that man in his way should emulate this habit and "keep above in the lofty places of heavenly meditations" in order to be "secured from the hungry chasings of the treacherous devil." Squirrels are easily tamed and were fashionable pets for medieval ladies.

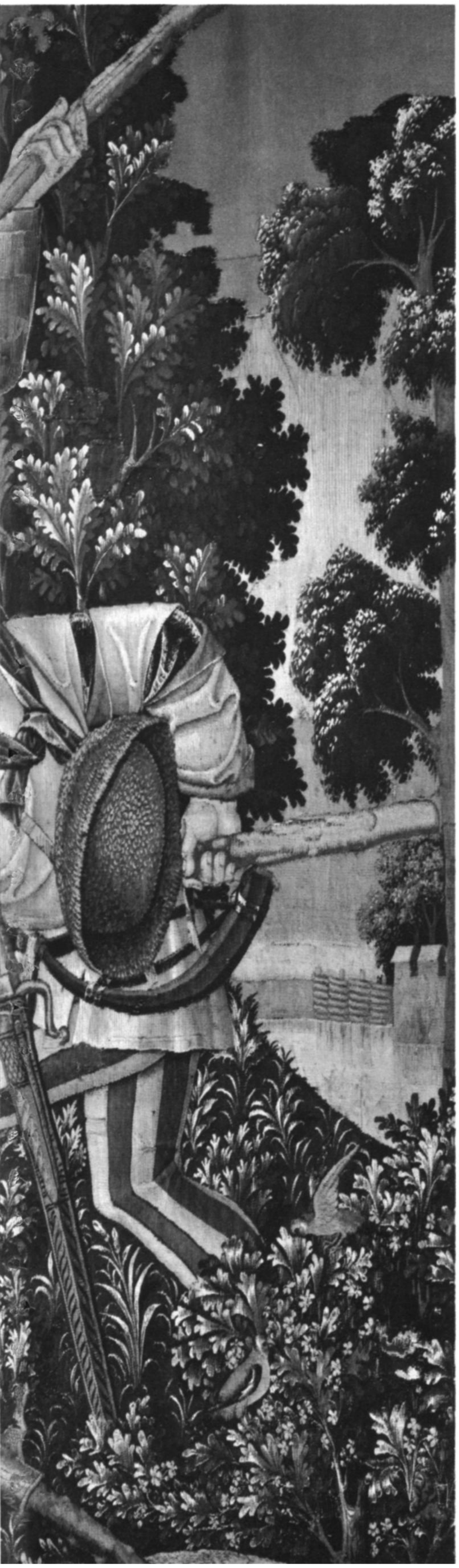
Of the hazelnut, it was believed that if "a branch or twig is split lengthwise and the two pieces laid close together, they will become joined by magic as if the wood has the spirit of life in it." This legendary quality of the tree explains its association with union, regeneration, and immortality.

A blackberry vine with nettles and white flowers twists around the hazelnut's trunk. Some theologians thought the bush Moses saw was a blackberry burning steadily but never consumed by the blaze; subsequently the blackberry became a symbol of "the blessed Virgin who was illuminated by the fire of the Holy Spirit, yet was not violated by the flame of concupiscence."

The tall flowers to the right derive their name from Iris, the Greek goddess who was messenger of the gods to men. The purple iris was greatly admired by the nobility and was often equated with the fleur-de-lis, a frequent motif on coats of arms, particularly those of the French royal house. The iris too was compared to the Mother of God, and fourteenth-century St. Birgitta of Sweden gives several reasons: just as the iris surpasses most flowers in height, Mary "reaches above all heights, for the greatly blessed Queen of Heaven excels all other creatures in majesty and might." The two sharp edges of the iris leaf have their own meanings associated with Mary: one is "the grief of her heart over the suffering of her son" and the other her "unflinching defense against all craftiness and power of the devil."



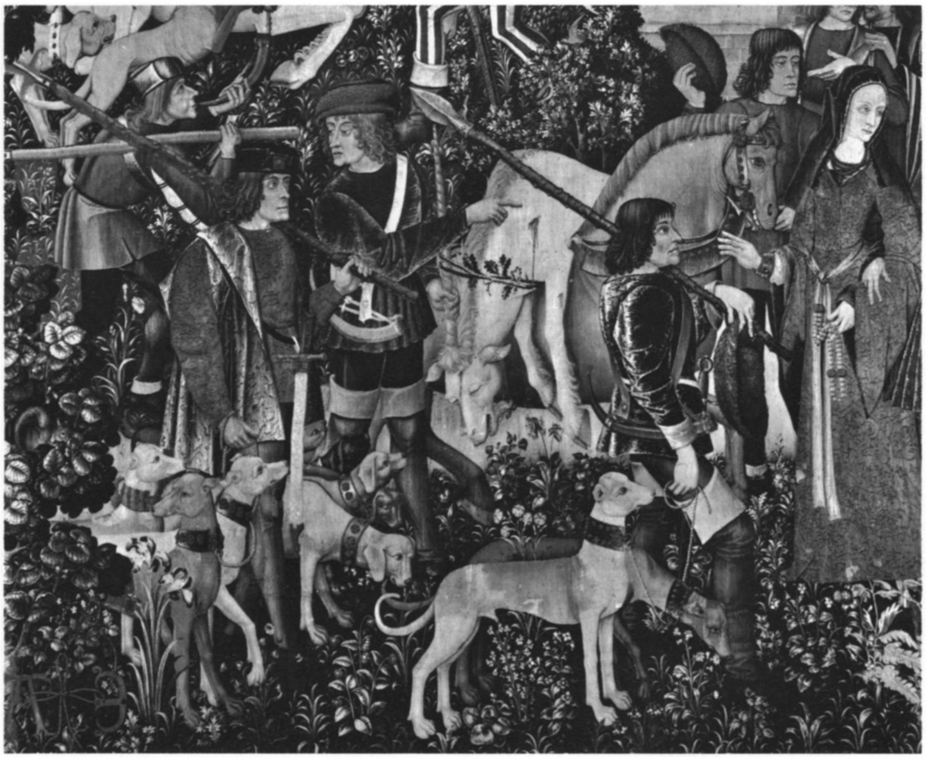




Left: The slaying of the unicorn occupies a relatively small portion of the tapestry – almost as if the designer found it unbearable to expand this event so filled with pathos into a larger composition. The scene is depicted with immense realism, and there is no attempt to minimize the suffering of the dying animal. Two huntsmen wound the animal in the throat and flank, while a young nobleman is about to deal the *coup de grâce* with his sword.

Below: Symbol of the crucified Christ, the dead unicorn wears around his neck a wreath that seems to consist of oak branches intermingled with hawthorn and holly. The prickly boughs may refer to the Saviour's crown of thorns, the oak to the strength and durability of the Christian faith as well as to the constancy of lovers. In antiquity oak leaves were used to make civic crowns – according to Pliny, "the most glorious reward that can be bestowed on military valor" – suggesting here the unicorn's bravery.

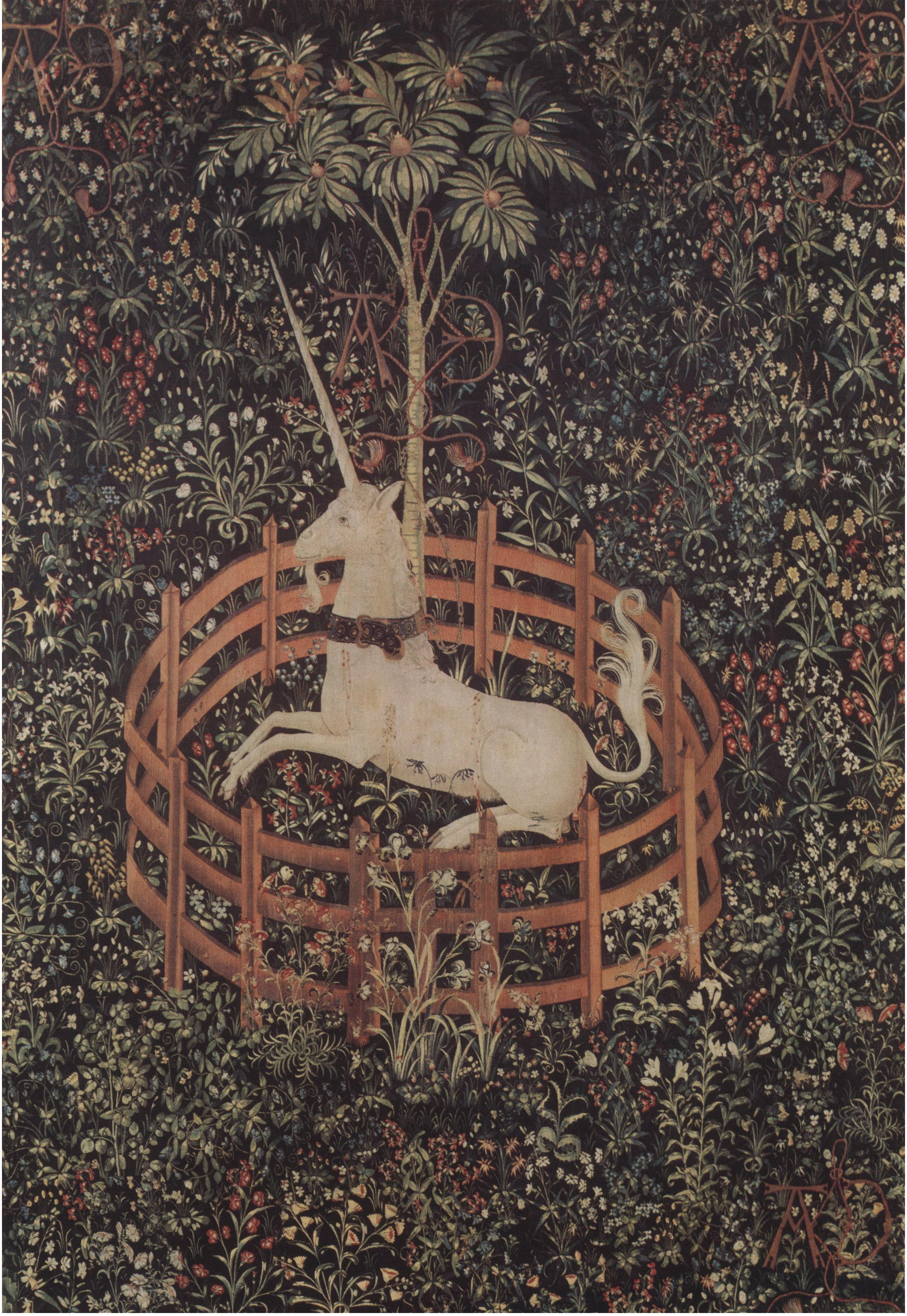
The horse carrying the unicorn is magnificent. In the Middle Ages fine, spirited horses, essential to knights, were often valued above all else, even wives! They were reputed to exult in combat and be totally devoted to their masters. One bestiary notes: "When their master is dead or dying, horses shed tears – for they say that only the horse can weep for man and feel the emotion of sorrow."

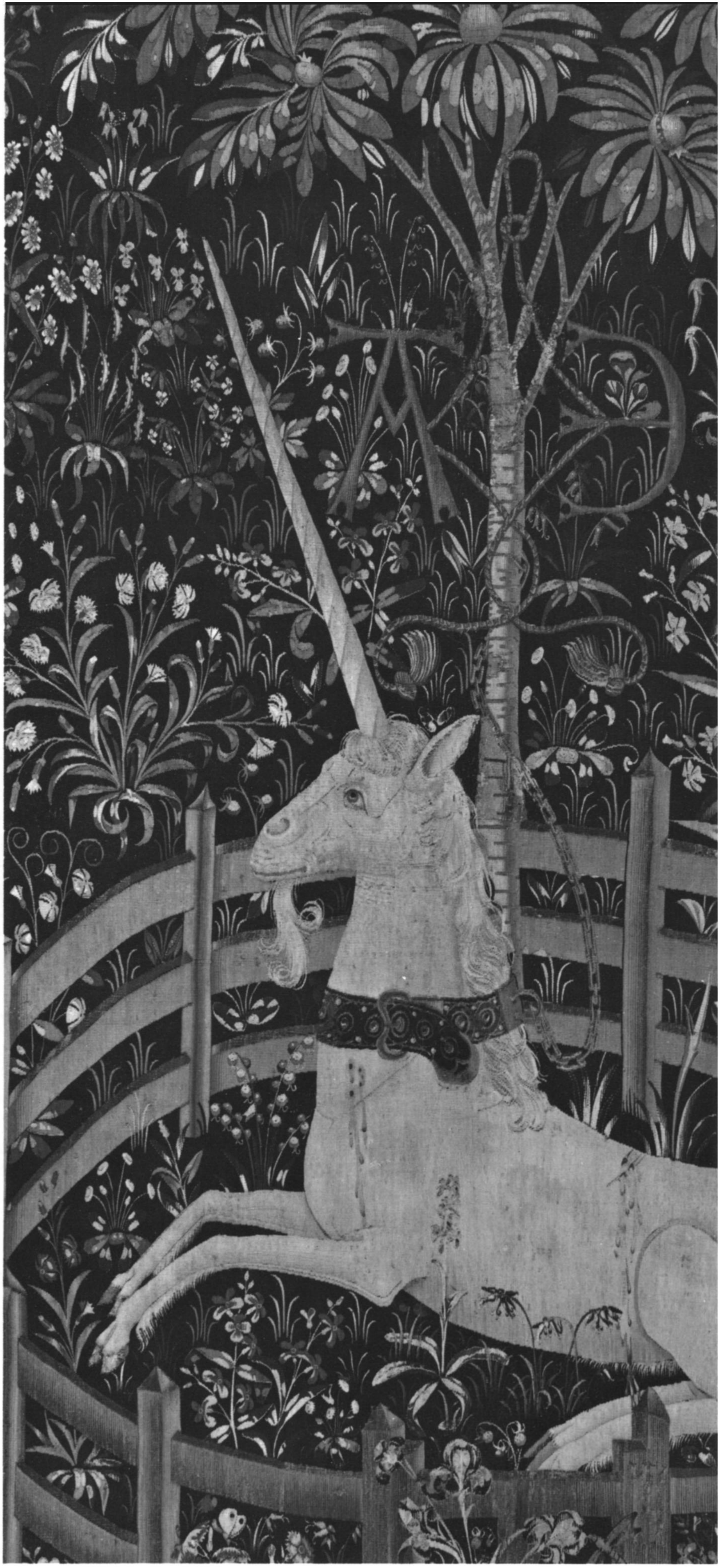


The Seventh Tapestry: The Unicorn in Captivity

In the last tapestry the unicorn, miraculously come to life again, rests within a circular wooden enclosure set against a dazzling *millefleurs* background that is surely one of the loveliest and most colorful in existence. It recalls a description of a castle garden in Boccaccio's *Decameron:* "In the middle of this garden, what seemed more delightful than anything else, was a plot of land like a meadow; the grass of a deep green, spangled with a thousand different flowers." Just looking at the seventh tapestry's exquisite spread of flowers must have lifted the hearts of people weary of winter and longing for the sights and smells of spring and early summer. Filled with botanical symbolism, this tapestry, more than the others, signifies earthly love and fruitful marriage.

Here the unicorn may be interpreted as the risen Christ in the midst of a Paradise garden. However, since he is collared and chained to a tree he is also an image of the lover-bridegroom, at last secured by his adored lady, his bride. This scene is not related in any way to the medieval stag hunt, but is the finale to the allegorical love hunt described by medieval poets and writers.





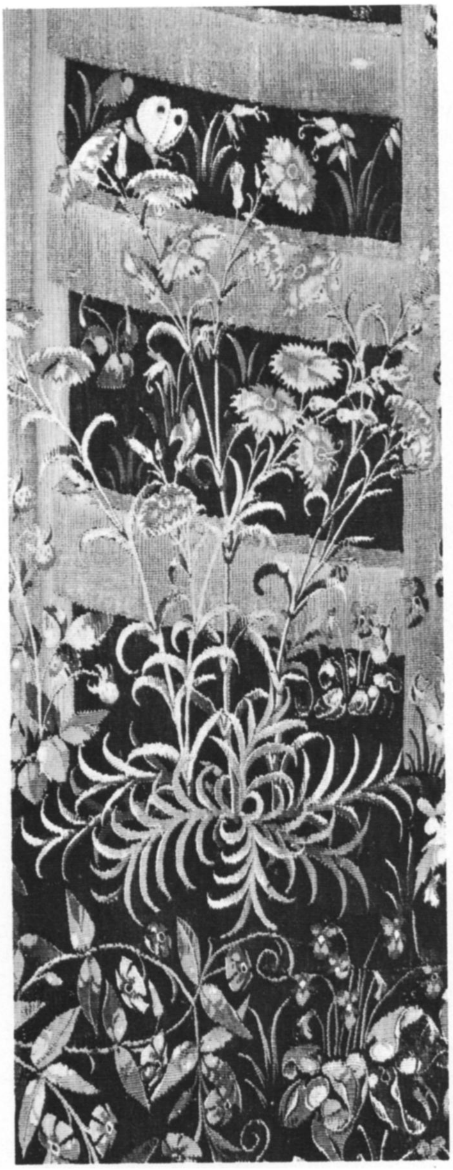
The *chaîne d'amour* or love chain that attaches the unicorn to the tree is frequently mentioned in medieval poetry to illustrate the gentleman's devotion to his lady and his complete subjection to her will. The tree itself is extraordinary: it is sheer fantasy, resembling no tree on earth, though its fruits are clearly pomegranates. Some are so ripe they have burst open, displaying their abundant seeds. The pomegranate is not only a symbol of the afterlife but, as said earlier, of fertility; thus it is significant that some of the seeds with their red juice have spilled onto the unicorn's milk-white body.

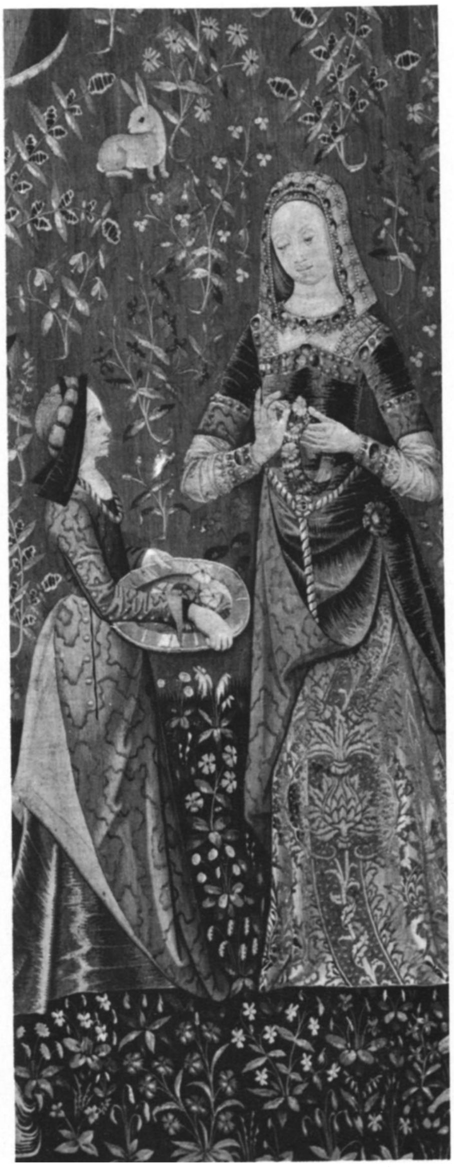
Silhouetted against the animal's torso are bluebell blossoms and, placed in a spot where it is especially noticeable, a tall wild orchid. Supposedly when a bluebell is suspended above the threshold, "all evil things will flee therefrom." The orchid had unique powers: medieval herbalists say "if a man eats the largest part of the root he will beget a male child," and if "the lesser part" he will produce a daughter.

The carnation was often planted in medieval gardens because of its delicate beauty and aromatic clove-like fragrance. In a Cluny tapestry (detail, far right) carnations are singled out to represent the sense of smell. Here the lady is fashioning a crown of red and white carnations while her handmaiden holds a golden platter with more fresh blossoms.

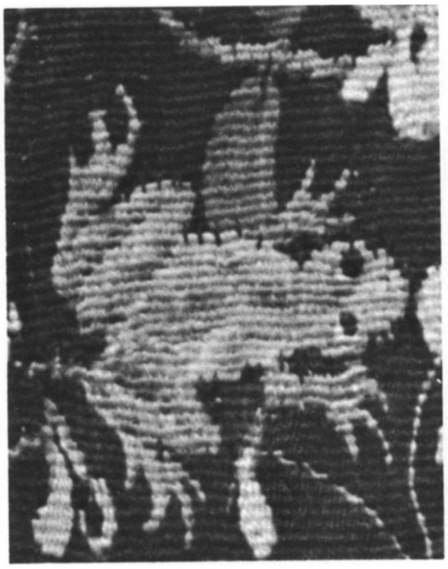
During the fifteenth century the carnation became popular as an emblem of betrothal and marriage and as a sign of Christ or the Virgin. It also symbolizes the nails driven into Christ's hands and feet because of the similarity of its fragrance to the nail-shaped clove. A cluster of crimson and white carnations (near right) appears prominently at the front of the enclosure in the seventh Cloisters tapestry. Above them flutters a white butterfly, a tiny black spot on each wing. His presence here is appropriate since he is a traditional symbol of love and fertility.

Below: Almost hidden amidst the flora above the AE in the lower right corner is this miniscule frog. He faces a white blossom and could easily be mistaken for a flower. It is interesting that apart from the unicorn and a few insects, he is the only other sign of animal life in this tapestry.





Photograph: Réunion des Musées Nationaux



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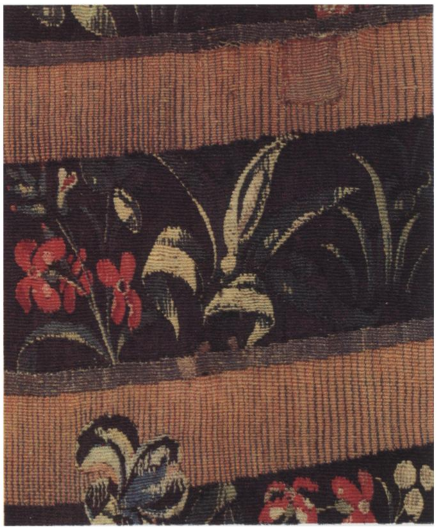
Some of the most beautiful flowers in the last tapestry are illustrated below. Included is the cuckoopint (top left) that Pliny claims can repel "serpents, especially asps, or make them so tipsy that they are found in a state of torpor." It also "drives away melancholy and makes people happy in their hearts."

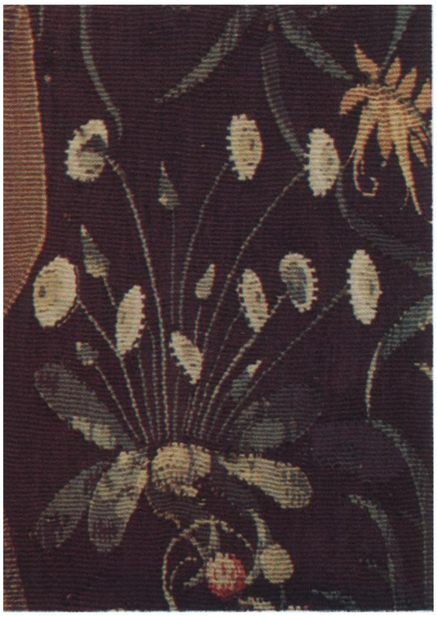
Different names were given the English daisy (lower left) during the Middle Ages: in France it was called *paquerette,* signifying the joy of Easter, and in medieval Germany it was *Massliebe* or measure of love, suggesting that even then girls plucked the petals saying, "He loves me, he loves me not."

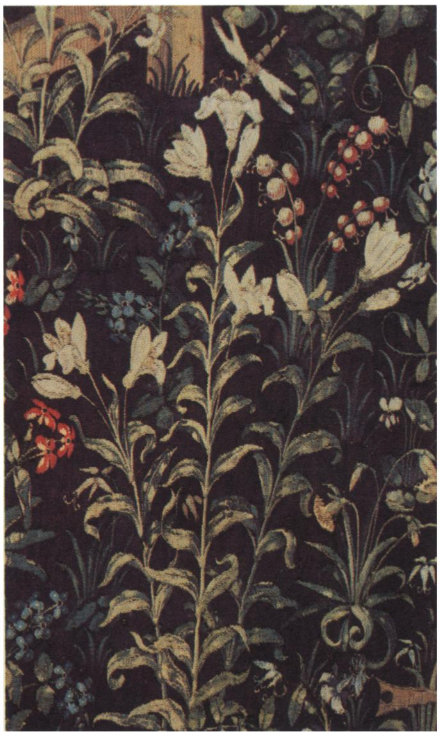
The Virgin Mary is often called the "lily of chastity," and the sweet-smelling Madonna lily (top center) is named especially for her. In the secular domain the flower's whiteness relates to the beloved's purity, its beauty and fragrance to the sweetness of love.

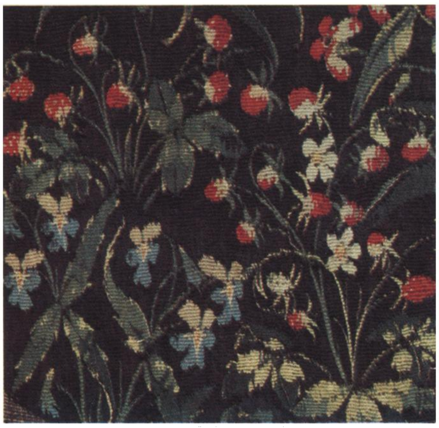
So delectable is the fruit of the flowering wild strawberry plant (lower center) that it was called "food for the blessed," and, according to cookbooks, strawberry tarts were a favorite medieval dessert. Medicinally the plant was thought to curb the effects of cholera, "evils of the spleen," and stomach disorders.

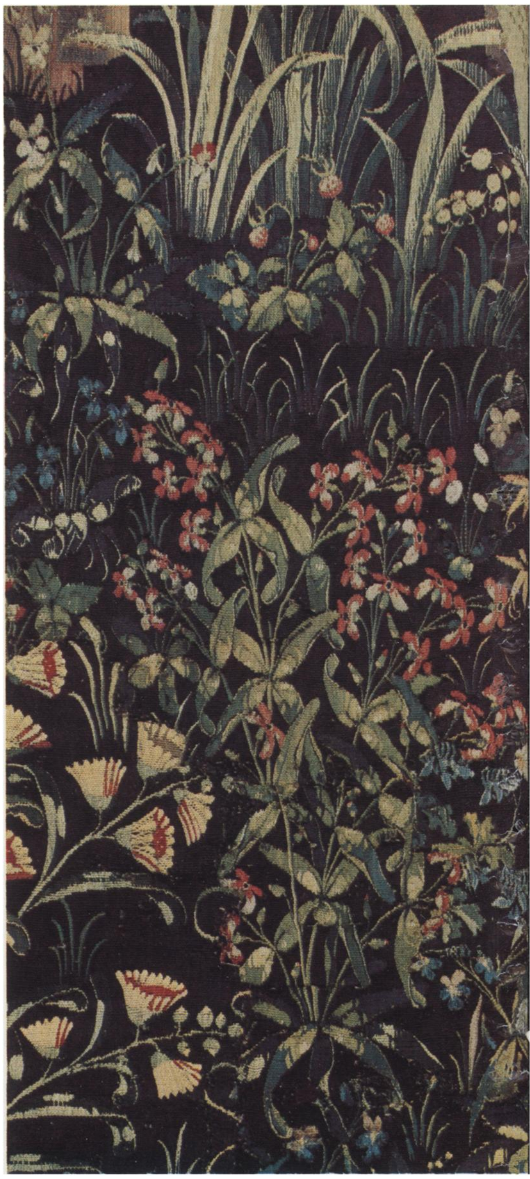
Below right: At the left in this picture is a mass of red wallflowers. They were used for curative pur-





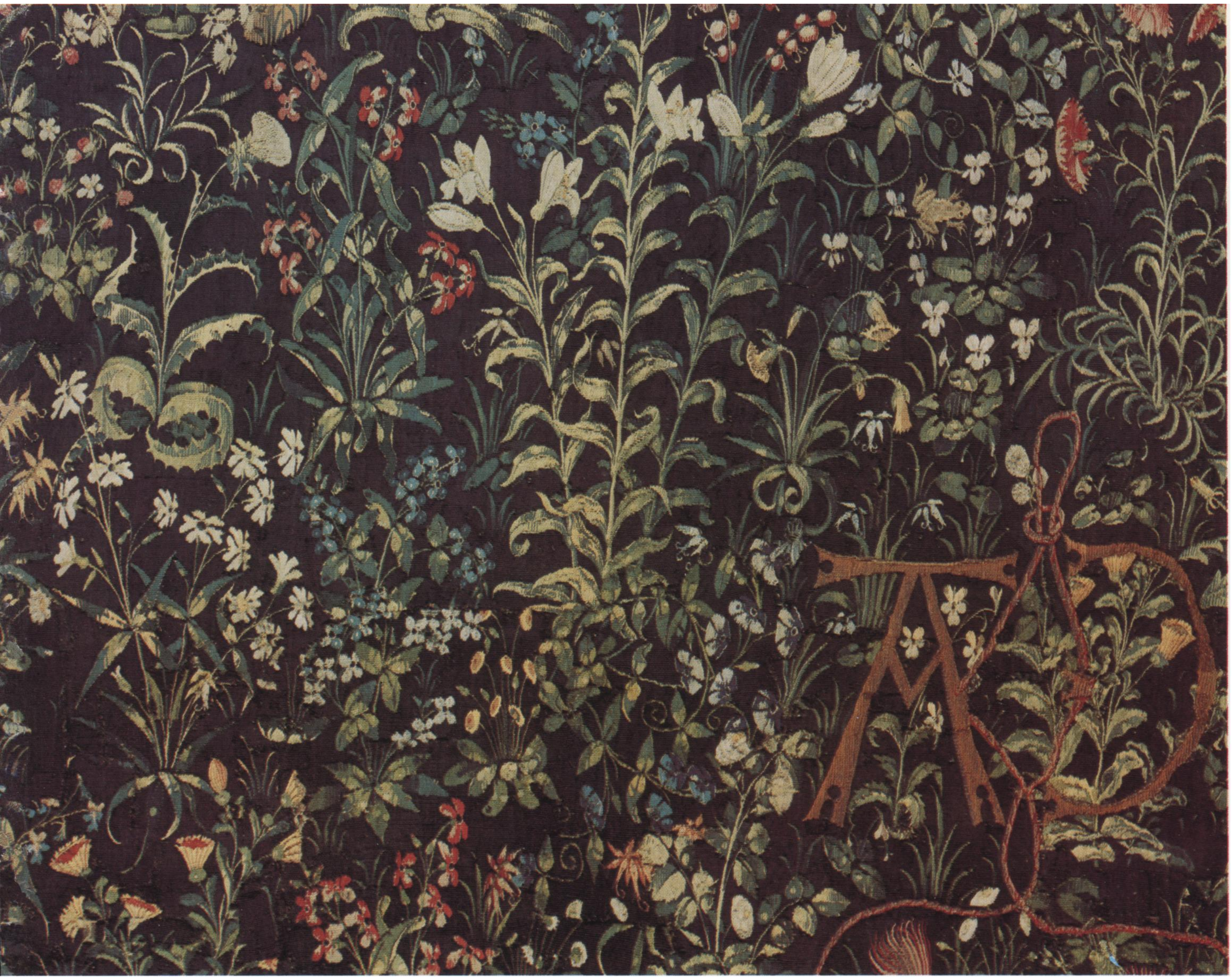






poses, primarily to ease the pain of childbirth and, in distilled form, to "make a woman fruitful." Just beneath them and a bit to the right is columbine. Its name is derived from the Latin *columba* or dove, and since the flower suggests a dove in shape, it was a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The columbine was thought to prevent impotence and was used by sorcerers "for their crafts."

Near the center of this picture is a plant with thorny leaves topped with a white flower. This is the St. Mary's thistle, another symbol of the Virgin's chastity. It may also serve here as a reminder of the difficult road that the unicorn-lover has had to endure to gain the acceptance of his beloved.



The Creation of the Unicorn Tapestries

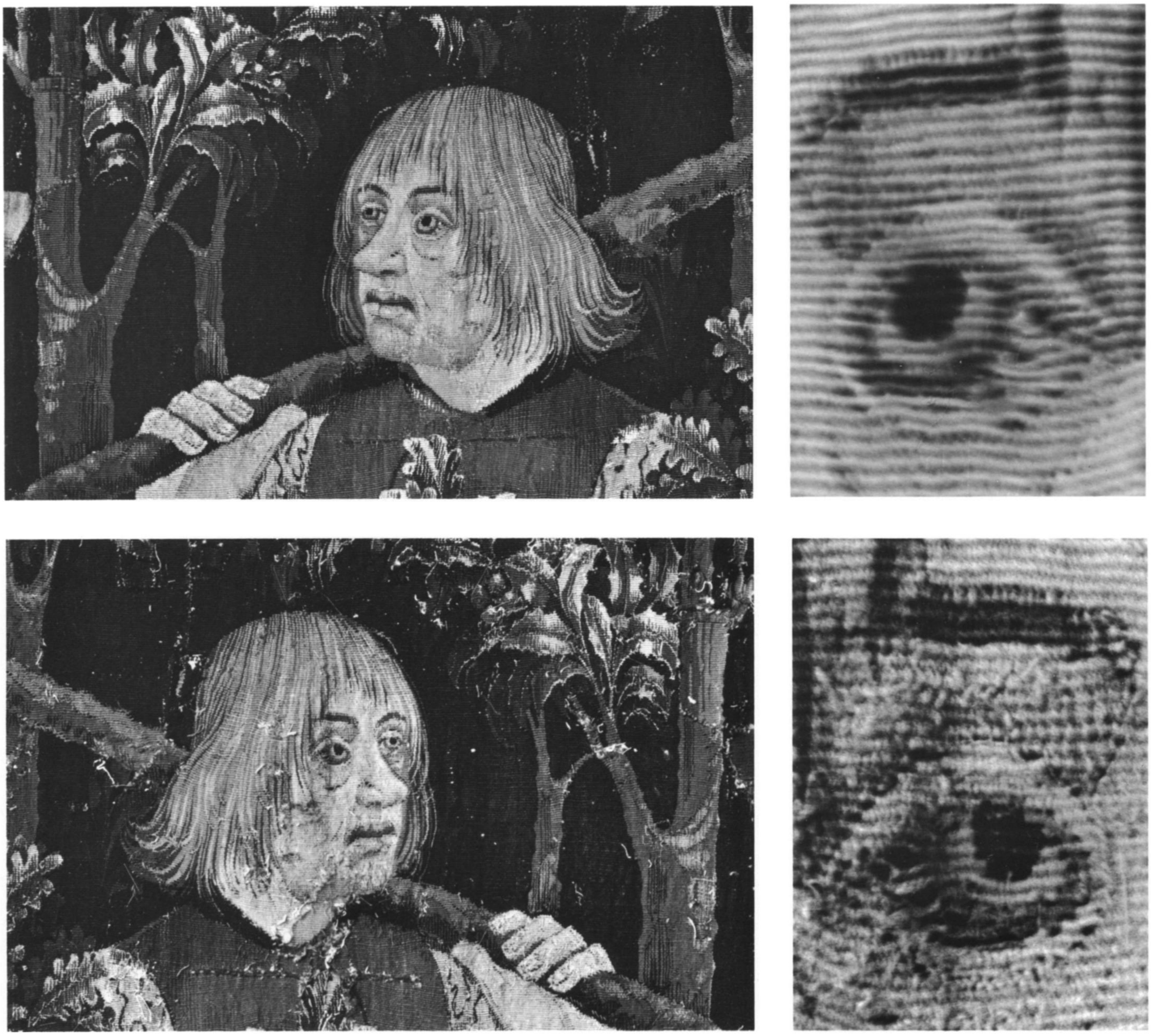
The superb accomplishment of creating the Unicorn Tapestries cannot be attributed to one individual. First there was the person who conceived ideas for subject matter and details. Then there were the designer of sketches and the painter of full-scale cartoons for weavers to follow; the dyers of the splendidly colorful silk and wool threads, and those who prepared metallic strands, all used as wefts for making the designs; the workmen who set up looms with heavy, undyed woolen warps; and finally the many weavers.

It is probable but not certain that more than one designer was involved, a theory based on stylistic differences between the rather static *millefleurs* hangings and the five more naturalistically rendered works. Other reasons have been set forth to explain the dissimilarities: one is that the first and last tapestries were not originally part of the same ensemble; another suggestion is that they were completed at a later date and added to the set; there is also a hypothesis that the unicorn series was fashioned for a bedroom, the *millefleurs* tapestries as bed fittings and the others as wall hangings.

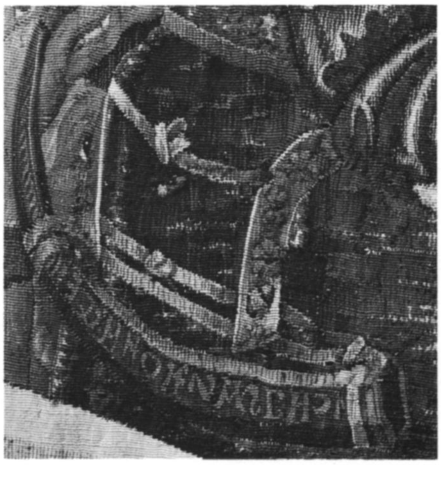
The design of the tapestries seems to reflect French influence, especially that of certain woodcuts and metalcuts printed in Paris in the late fifteenth century. It is highly probable, however, that the tapestries were woven in Flanders, most likely around 1500 in Brussels, which was the great center of tapestry weaving of the period. The skilled workmanship in the Unicorn Tapestries, particularly the extremely fine quality of the weaving, is typical of the remarkable works of art produced on Brussels looms.

Medieval looms were set up so that the warp threads in the finished tapestry run horizontally. The weavers worked sideways and from the back. In examples as large as the Unicorn Tapestries several persons wove together at the same loom. The warp threads, tightly twisted and very strong, were covered by the finer weft threads that create the design. The warps are visible only as extremely thin ribs (about sixteen to eighteen per inch).

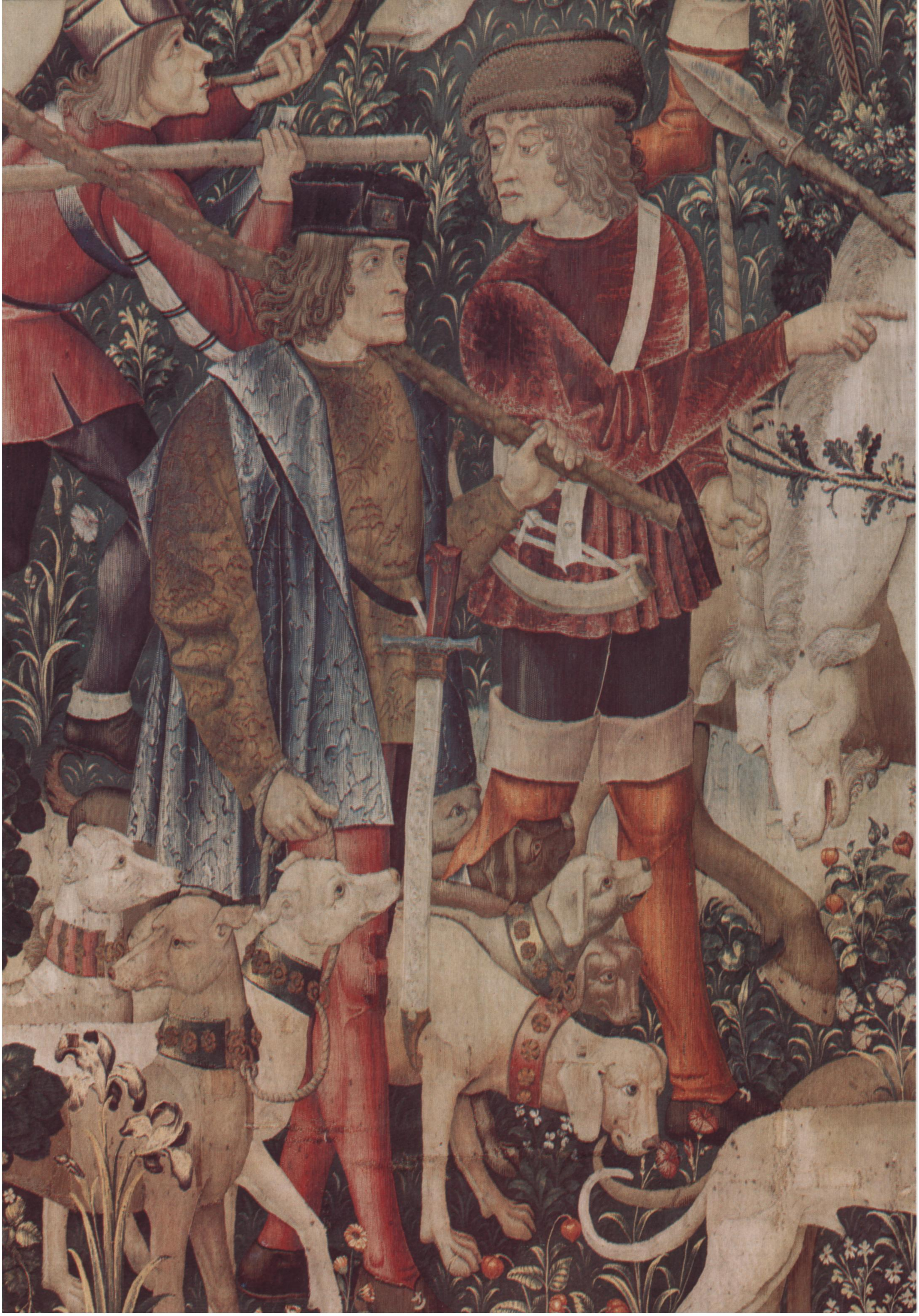
Each Cloisters tapestry has a distinctive tempo and mood, yet the entire group is unified by recurring motifs such as the unicorn, the hunters, the brook, and the castle. Whoever designed them, whatever their stylistic heritage, the Unicorn Tapestries are undoubtedly masterworks and among the loveliest tapestries ever made.



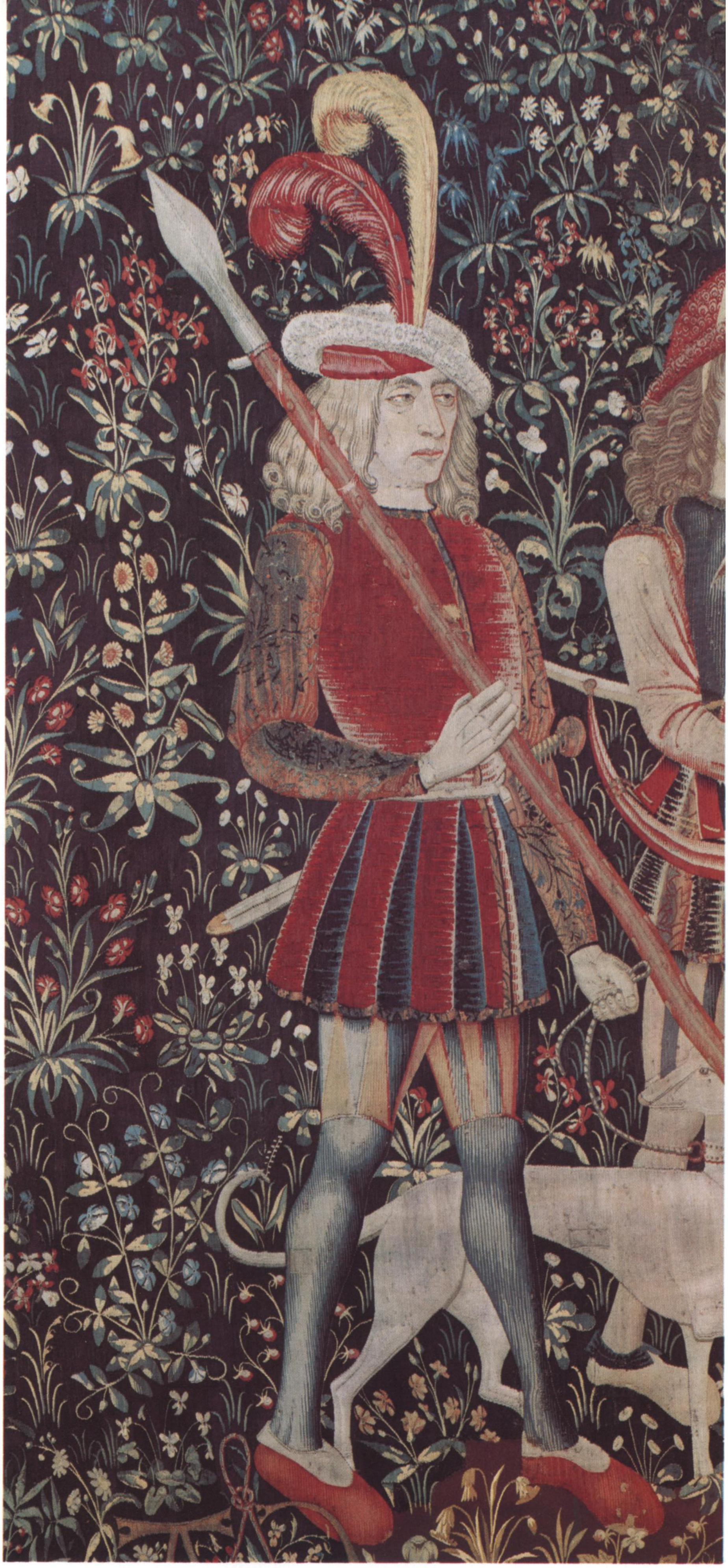
Above: These details show that the back of the tapestry (lower pictures) is practically the same as the front, in reverse, even down to the eyes and strands of hair. This is a phenomenon peculiar to the tapestry-weaving technique, in which weft threads of each color are woven only over the exact area where the design requires them, and the loose ends, thin and tightly wrapped around the warp threads, are hidden.



Right: A barely decipherable inscription on a hunting horn in the second tapestry could be a key to the name of the tapestries' designer: some of the letters may form the name *Jean*, and an isolated "e" may be part of the Latin *fecit* or "made by."



The disparities in design and weaving between the first and last of the series – the *millefleurs* tapestries – and the others can be seen by comparing details. As mentioned before, the contrast is quite obvious in the treatment of flowers and trees; the most conspicuous instance is the tree in the seventh tapestry that has fruits recognizable as pomegranates, though the tree itself is totally imaginary, whereas in the third tapestry both pomegranate fruit and shrub are correctly depicted. The same contrast can also be seen in the design of figures: compare the huntsman from the first tapestry (right), stiff as a wooden mannequin, with the spontaneous men realistically portrayed in the sixth (left).



The Original Ownership of the Unicorn Tapestries

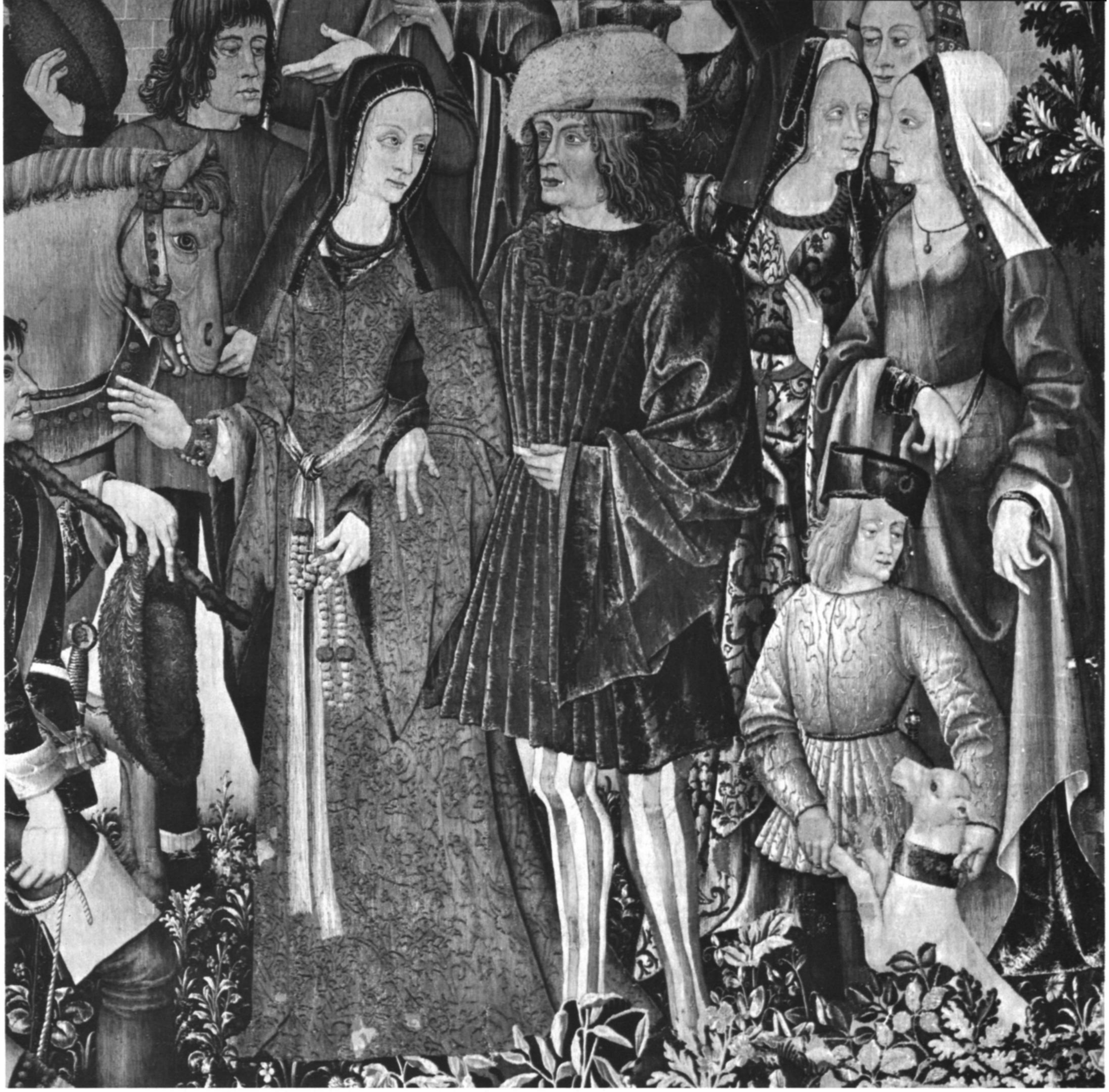
It is still not known for whom the tapestries were woven, but the omnipresent A and reversed E joined with a bow (opposite, lower left) may eventually provide a clue. One theory links the insignia to Anne of Brittany, twice queen of France, claiming that it represents the first and last letters of her name, united by her emblem, the *cordelière* – a rope with tight knots spaced at intervals. The cord, however, is not a true *cordelière*, for it lacks the characteristic tight knots and is instead a *lac* or simple knot, a popular medieval device.

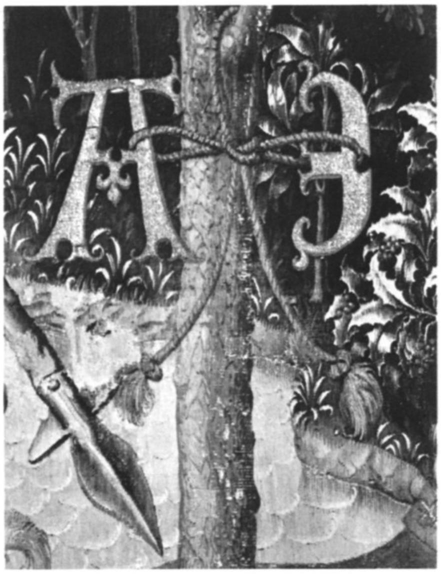
The same theory suggests that the lord and lady receiving the dead unicorn in the sixth tapestry (opposite) are Anne and her husband Louis XII, and that the tapestries were commissioned for their wedding in 1499. Although the lord vaguely resembles Louis in certain portraits, the lady does not resemble any known likeness of the queen. Furthermore, Anne was twenty-two when she married Louis, and the woman depicted here seems older than that. Many other explanations for the AE have been proposed, but none can be proven; the cipher's meaning remains a mystery.

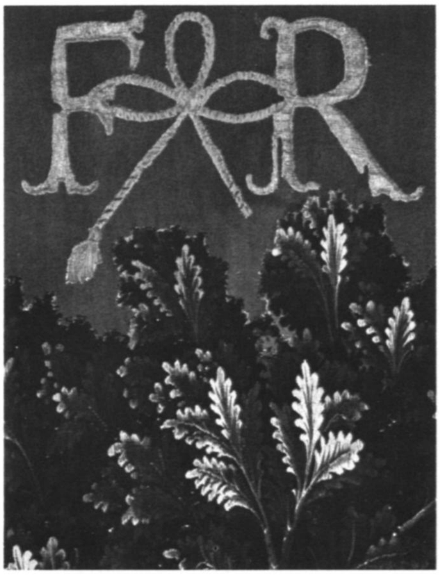
The initials F and R sewn onto the partially restored sky in the third tapestry (lower center) associate the unicorn series with the noble La Rochefoucauld family that, to this day, believes the original owners of the tapestries were its ancestors Jean II de La Rochefoucauld and his wife Marguerite de Barbezieux. Jean died around 1471, and since the style of the tapestries is later, they could not have been completed in his lifetime. It is more likely that the set may have been commissioned for the couple's son François. There seem to be no existing portraits of François and his two wives so any comparison of them with the lord and lady of the sixth tapestry is impossible. His first marriage, in 1470, was to Louise de Crussol, who bore him six children before she died at an unknown date. The crest of her family seal, interestingly enough, was a unicorn's head. But the couple in the tapestry is no longer young, and thus might represent François and his second wife, Barbe du Bois; in this case the small boy petting his dog could be one of François's sons by his first wife. It is remotely possible that the sable lion on the banner (lower right) flying from a rooftop of the castle behind the *seigneur* and his lady might be the coat of arms of the family of Barbe du Bois.

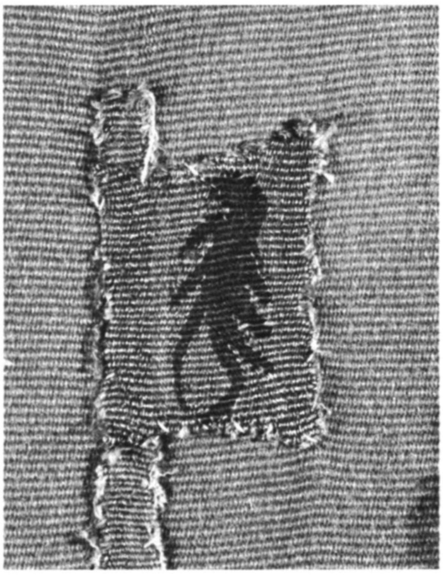
It is also possible that there is a connection between the AE and the La Rochefoucauld house. Those letters are the first and last of Antoine, the name of François's son, and of his wife, Antoinette of Amboise.

Since it is the FR monogram, however, that is largely responsible for the belief that the tapestries were woven for François, it is essential to know if the initials were originally part of the unicorn set. Careful analysis of the superimposed letters reveals that their warp threads are finer than those in the tapestries and their metallic weft threads different in composition. There is, nonetheless, another idea worthy of consideration, based on the possibility that the unicorn series was designed as a bedroom ensemble, the five hunting scenes for the walls, the two with *millefleurs* backgrounds for the back of the bed, as a coverlet, or an overhead canopy. If the *millefleurs* tapestries were in fact designed for a bed, the FR monogram may have been included in a separate narrow cornice band surrounding the canopy, and could have been woven on a small loom with warp threads finer than those in the larger hangings. And so, although not verifiable, the idea that the FR monogram was part of the original set cannot be discounted.




AE


F R



The History of the Unicorn Tapestries: 1680 to the Present

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the history of the Unicorn Tapestries is based on hard facts rather than on guesswork. A list of the possessions of François VI de La Rochefoucauld made when he died in 1680 includes "tapestries representing a hunt of the unicorn in seven pieces." These adorned the bedroom of his townhouse in Paris.

An inventory of 1728 records that the tapestries were then hanging in the La Rochefoucauld château at Verteuil, about 250 miles south of Paris, where they remained until the French Revolution. In 1793 village peasants absconded with them, and it is said their descendants used them "to protect from freezing the potatoes in their barns."

It was not until the mid-1850s that the severely damaged tapestries were located, restored, and then reinstalled at the Verteuil castle after a bizarre and fortuitous incident: a peasant's wife told the wife of Count Hippolyte de La Rochefoucauld about some "old curtains" her husband used in his barn to cover vegetables. The old curtains turned out to be the Unicorn Tapestries.

Still in the La Rochefoucauld family in 1922, the six large tapestries were sent that year to New York for a gallery exhibition, where John D. Rockefeller saw them and was overwhelmed. Looking back on the experience he later wrote: "I merely lingered five minutes to satisfy my eye with the beauty and richness of their color and design and bought them forthwith." The room he created in his New York City residence for the tapestries became Mr. Rockefeller's favorite retreat.

Impressed with the plans worked out by James Rorimer (later Director of the Metropolitan) for The Cloisters, the Museum's medieval branch in Fort Tryon Park, Mr. Rockefeller agreed in 1935 to present his six tapestries to The Cloisters.

Cleaning, restoration, and extensive research began apace. In 1936 the fragments of the fifth tapestry were found in the Paris collection of Count Gabriel de La Rochefoucauld. At first unwilling to part with them, he sold the fragments two years later to the Metropolitan.

The Cloisters opened in 1938 with the entire unicorn series on view in a long gallery that did not please Mr. Rockefeller. He wanted the tapestries complemented by a setting that would enable the public to experience the same thrill he had felt when he first saw these treasures. It was subsequently decided that the tapestries should hang on all four walls of an intimate room constructed and furnished like one in a medieval château. Completed in 1949, the new room delighted Mr. Rockefeller. Thereafter whenever he came to meetings at The Cloisters he would never leave before asking, "And now may I see the Unicorn Tapestries?"

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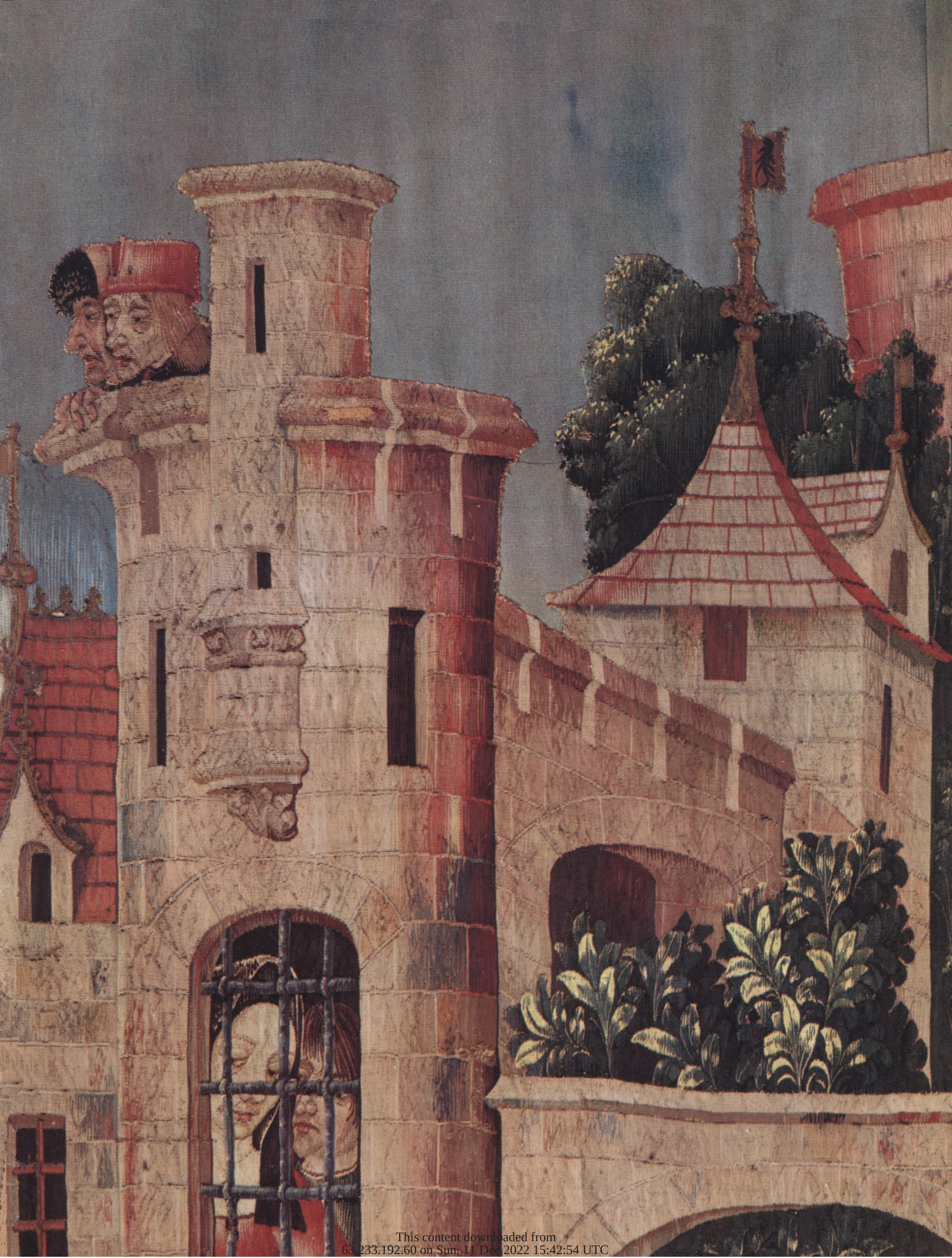

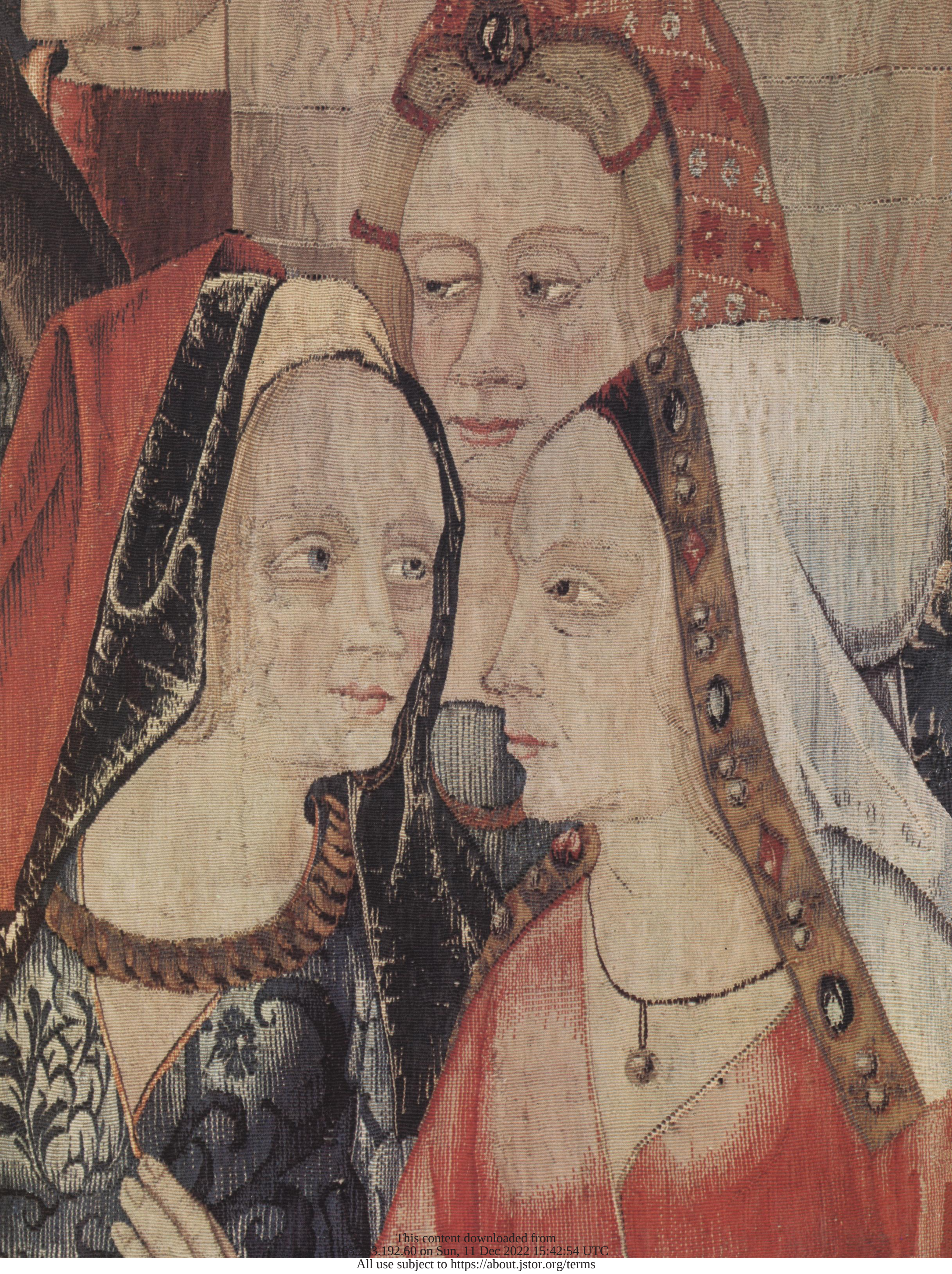

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